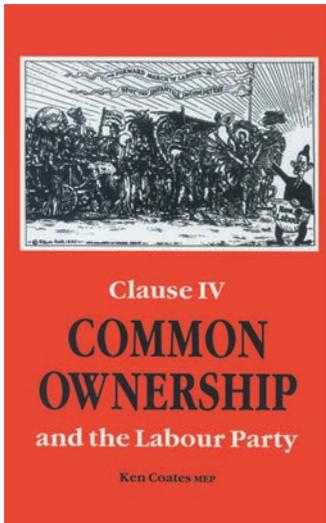


Better Idea

Tony Simpson



The author worked with Ken Coates from 1980 until 2010. He focuses on industrial democracy in his brief introduction to the Ken Coates Memorial Lecture.

Picture the scene. A windowless room. Ear-phones on. Suddenly, Jeremy Paxman crackles across the airwaves:

‘What’s so precious about your conscience, Ken Coates?’

‘It’s as precious as yours, Jeremy!’

comes the swift reply.

It was 1994, and Tony Blair wanted to ditch the Labour Party’s constitutional commitment to common ownership, stated in Clause 4 of the Party’s constitution. Ken with some other Labour Members of the European Parliament opposed Blair’s changes. Although he had misgivings about the existing clause, Ken had much deeper concerns about the direction in which New Labour was going.

So it was, some 16 years later, in May 2010, that Ken wrote an encouraging letter to Ed Miliband, who had just declared that he was standing for the leadership of the Labour Party. Ken wished Ed well, adding that he was no longer a member of the Labour Party himself, having been expelled by New Labour, and continued:

‘Clause IV was a highly imperfect document, much aggravated by the false identification of common ownership with Morrisonian forms of nationalisation ... That part of the Clause IV commitment that was vital was to the best obtainable form of democratic administration.’

Extending democracy, particularly at work, was the main motivating idea of the Institute for Workers’ Control, whose banner was raised aloft by Ken and other comrades (see *Spokesman 128* cover). Tamara, Ken’s wife, remembers making the banner for Levellers Day at Burford in 1976. Incidentally, the IWC held a well-attended weekend conference in this very building at

Nottingham University, some months after Jim Callaghan lost the 1979 election. Tony Benn, Ron Todd and Eric Heffer all spoke in the room next door. One of the main themes, in addition to the early signs of Mrs Thatcher 'de-industrialising' the economy, was democratisation of the Labour Party. Those constitutional changes, initiated in part by Rushcliffe Constituency Labour Party, of which Ken was secretary, widened the franchise for electing the leader of the Labour Party to include trade unions and constituency labour parties. Previously, the electorate was confined to a few hundred Labour MPs.

A principal reason in my mind for inviting Frances O'Grady to give the inaugural Ken Coates Memorial Lecture is her consistent advocacy of 'workplace democracy' and the need for workers' voices to be heard in corporate governance. We are very grateful to her for making the time to come and talk to us in the early days of a new government, which has hastened to announce changes that will make it more difficult for trade unions to fulfil their democratic role and basic purpose of protecting and advancing rights, wages and conditions at work.

Jack Jones was held in high regard by Ken Coates, and Frances has put on record her own appreciation of Jack's encouragement and his 'intelligent trade unionism'. Jack Jones was elected General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union in 1968 and continued in post for an eventful decade. He 'sustained a programme of demands for industrial democracy which culminated in the Bullock Report' (of 1977),' was the way Ken Coates described events to Ed Miliband in his letter. Ken was concerned about slavery at the workplace, which

'has created a great mass of people whose status accustoms them, while at work, to taking orders, rather than shaping, or helping to shape decisions ... to reopen the argument about industrial democracy, as widely as possible, is a crucial choice, which has become more relevant with the growth of new technologies, and with the extensive polarisation which has given birth to our underclass. The servile industrial state generates a dire state of mind ... it will surely be impossible to create a self-confident Labour Movement which remains in thrall to this mindset. You need to rehabilitate the goal of freedom in order to revive any tolerable aspirations to democratic socialism.'

Democracy and freedom were key elements of Ken's 'better idea', as he called it. Otherwise, he said, 'the helots will continue to vote for helotry,' which is one way, perhaps, of looking at recent events.

Ken Fleet and Regan Scott are with us tonight. Over decades, they worked with Ken on campaigns advanced by the Institute for Workers' Control, those organised by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, such as European Nuclear Disarmament, and on sustained work for full

employment in Europe, whilst Ken was an elected member of the European Parliament from 1989 to 1999. Stuart Holland continues that work with his sustained advocacy of a New Deal for Europe, persuasively argued in his recent book, *Europe in Question – and what to do about it*.

Sadly, Michael Barratt Brown, the founder of Northern College for adult students, the ‘Ruskin of the North, is not with us. Michael died in May, in his 98th year. You will find some of the books he co-authored with Ken in the list Abi Rhodes has prepared, together with those written in collaboration with Tony Topham, Ken’s long-term comrade in the IWC and other campaigns, who died in 2004.

We in the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, and Tamara, as well, are grateful to Tom Unterrainer, activist and teacher, and Ross Bradshaw, writer, publisher and bookseller, founder of Five Leaves, Nottingham’s thriving radical bookshop, for seeding the idea of the Ken Coates Memorial Lecture and helping to make it happen. We also acknowledge with gratitude the generous help and support of Professor Andreas Bieler of Nottingham University’s Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice for hosting our meeting here, and that of the local University and College Union association and UNITE the Union in the East Midlands.

Tom is preparing an annotated bibliography of Ken Coates’ extensive writings, which will supplement the archive of his mainly Parliamentary papers, already held in Nottingham University’s Manuscripts and Special Collections. As well as graduating from this University, as he describes in *Spokesman 116*, entitled *Resist Much, Obey Little*, Ken Coates also worked in its Adult Education Department for some 30 years, where he taught day release classes for trade unionists, including many miners, workers from Rolls Royce in Derby, and local government workers. In addition, he taught evening classes at the Workers’ Educational Association in Shakespeare Street, which is where some of us first met him. In collaboration with Richard Silburn, who is here, that gave rise to the St. Ann’s survey and, eventually, to the Penguin Classic, *Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen*.

Tom Unterrainer’s work in progress will form part of the continuing programme to make full use of the rich legacy of Ken Coates’ life and work for democracy, freedom and peace.

‘to secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.’ (Clause 4).