

# A Flower of the Labour Movement

I thought of, I think of Ken, as a venerable spreading tree under which we could sit, and, sitting there, learn what to do.

**John Berger**

He was a wonderful person, and will be sorely missed.

**Noam Chomsky**

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Ken was one of the best and most influential socialist activists, politicians, and writers of the European Left. From the Institute for Workers' Control, the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, European Nuclear Disarmament, the European Appeal for Full Employment, to Socialist Renewal, he played a leading part in the Left and the labour movement.

Rare are people with such gifts: Ken combined a superb grasp of abstract economic and political issues, with the ability to organise within the broad trade union movement and peace campaigners. His experience as a coal miner (never worn as a trump against 'intellectuals'), his easy relations with ordinary working people, and his enduring commitment to grass-roots activity, earned him great respect.

I came into direct contact with Ken during his period as a Member of the European Parliament (1989 to 1999). The European Full Employment Conventions (both held in Brussels at the Parliament) had a wide echo. Attending them both was to realise just how widely and deeply Ken was respected. The delegation from Southern England (filling a coach from London) was made up of the kind of salt-of-the-earth left and union activists that keep

*Many spontaneous tributes to Ken Coates were published when his death was announced in June 2010. We reprint a small selection, together with excerpts from those made at Ken's funeral in Chesterfield, which was attended by more than 200 people.*

our movement going. The Full Employment Appeal itself – which demanded decent levels of benefit and real job creation – is particularly relevant during the present economic crisis, and an answer to calls to slash-and-burn the public sector.

Ken stood four-square in the tradition of democratic socialism and promoted the self-management principles of workers' control with brio. He was evicted from the Labour Party (1998) over his protests with Hugh Kerr against dropping Clause Four. Efforts to form an alternative through the Independent Labour Network were not successful. However, the steady stream of pamphlets from *Socialist Renewal*, his articles and books, and the journal/publishing house, *Spokesman*, continued. They interested, and will keep interesting, a wide public.

Like many on the left with similar views I have scores and scores of letters from Ken (the most recent was a written reply to an email about a year back). Ken seems never to have really trusted the Web for writing. His ability to engage in constant dialogue pre-dated Blogs, Newsgroups and Facebook. It was just one of the aspects that made him so deeply rooted in the best sides of the European, and world, socialist tradition.

Ken Coates was a *flower of the labour movement*.

He leaves behind comrades with warm memories and a determination to build on his achievements.

**Andrew Coates**

*(tendancecoatesy.wordpress.com)*

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### **Inspiration**

*Andy Newman posted this tribute on the Socialist Unity website, under the title 'The Legacy of Ken Coates'.*

I never knew Ken Coates personally, but I was sad to read of his recent passing. He played a very important role in the development of left ideas within the Labour Party.

During the 1960s, the traditional Bevanite left of the Party were increasingly staid, and identified state ownership as an end in itself. For example, Michael Foot in an interview with *New Left Review* in 1968 responded to the critics of the New Left by saying that there was nothing wrong with the strategy of corporate state ownership and Keynesianism economics, the problem was only the failure of Labour governments to implement the programme vigorously enough. Insofar as there was a mainstream radical alternative within the Labour Party it was from revisionists such as Crosland, Jay and Jenkins, who wanted to see less

emphasis on the issues of state ownership, and more determination to pursue goals of fighting disadvantage and inequality.

Ken Coates was a vital figure, because he rejected the complacency and social conservatism of the Bevanites from the left, but determined to stay in the Labour Party, rather than go into what he saw as the self-righteous political wilderness of the New Left.

He was instrumental in 1968 in establishing the Institute for Workers Control, in conjunction with the publication *Voice of the Unions*, and various academics and activists. Prominent supporters of the IWC included Hugh Scanlon and Jack Jones, who were elected to become the leaders of the engineers and TGWU in 1967 and 1969.

Alongside his colleague, Tony Topham, Coates tirelessly argued in books and pamphlets for different models of social ownership, as opposed to the Morrisonian reality of state owned corporations in the same form as private corporations.

Coates argued that

‘Workers’ control brings back into the working class ... all that tremendous weight of self-esteem, of self recognition, of self respect, which has been stripped away by years of bureaucratic intrigues and manoeuvres in political institutions.’

Vitality, Ken Coates saw the need to develop practical alternative policies which could be pursued by working people, which were both pragmatic, but challenged the logic of the market. The Lucas Plan from the 1970s is the most famous example, for alternative production to meet social needs. As such, Ken Coates was a key intellectual and organising figure for the revival of the left in the Labour Party in the early 1980s.

He was elected as a Labour MEP in 1989, and did ten years of well respected work in the European Parliament. He was an outspoken critic of New Labour, which represented the attempt to negate his entire life’s work and, scandalously, he was expelled from the Party in 1998, alongside Hugh Kerr MEP.

Ken Coates will be remembered as an inspiration, not just as a personal example, but because his ideas remain vital and relevant, and will continue to inform debate on the left for years to come.

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It is with much emotion that I learned about Ken’s death. I have always seen him as a man of exception, constantly involved in the promotion of peace and justice throughout the world.

Of course, it is in this spirit that we will continue the work of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, for which he greatly helped us.

**Pierre Galand, Russell Tribunal on Palestine**

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### **From Italy**

For the Italian peace movement, Ken Coates was a friend who never let you down, and always taught you something new. It was Ken who first warned us that Cruise missiles were about to be deployed in the Comiso military base, at a time when most of us didn't even know where Comiso was. We found it on the map, in Sicily – in the very south of a continent which, at that time, in the early 1980s, was still divided in two military blocs bent upon the mad intent of pursuing MAD – Mutually Assured Destruction (that was the meaning of the acronym), and of so-called nuclear deterrence. An arms race which brought Cruise and Pershing missiles to the West (from Comiso to Greenham Common), and SS20s to Eastern Europe, triggering a new peace movement all over the Continent, from the Atlantic to the Urals. That movement changed the hearts and minds of millions of Europeans, stopped the arms race, and helped bring down the Berlin Wall. That movement had leaders such as Ken Coates of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, and coordinator, with Luciana Castellina, of the European Nuclear Disarmament campaign. Ken was with us when we decided to hold the END Convention in Perugia, in 1984: not only among West Europeans, but also with the representatives of Eastern Europe, engaged in a difficult struggle for peace, freedom, and the end of dictatorship.

Later, in the ten years when Ken sat in the European Parliament, we knew we could always turn to him for advice and support, and for new initiatives against the new faces of War, be it in Iraq or the Balkans, in Sudan or the Middle East.

We will sorely miss him: but next year, when we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Peace March from Perugia to Assisi, we will certainly feel his presence, marching along with us as he had done so many times, with other friends we have lost, from E.P. Thompson to Lucio Lombardo Radice, from Alex Langer to Tom Benetollo, hand in hand with a new generation of activists ready to face the challenge of a new Europe in a new world, free from war, injustice and oppression.

**Luciana Castellina, Chiara Ingrao, Flavio Lotti,  
Raffaella Bolini, Raffaella Chiodo, Luisa Morgantini,  
Giampiero Rasimelli and some 200 others**

## **RESOLUTE**

*i.m. Ken Coates*

One more good man gone!  
Haiku he liked – hence, alas,  
this briefest tribute.

**Alexis Lykiard**

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## **From Greece**

We express our deep sorrow for the sudden death of your Foundation's President, Ken Coates.

A great figure of the peace and anti-nuclear movement, of the British and European Left, was lost. A man who started as a miner, in 1948, and became an intellectual with many writings; a true internationalist and consistent supporter of the Greek people's struggle for democracy, peace and national independence.

Ken Coates was a close associate of the philosopher Bertrand Russell, whose work he continued at the frontlines of the peace movement in the difficult Cold War years. During the crucial 1980s decade, he played a decisive and leading role for the creation of END, the European Nuclear Disarmament movement.

Ken Coates believed in the European coordination of social movements, as well as of the European Left. In this framework our roads met and we worked together in many struggles, in the movements and in the European Parliament, where he was one of the most active members during 1989-99.

We will also remember him as a distinguished friend of our Party, who had come to Greece to support our political activities.

The loss of Ken Coates is great in the present crucial period that the European working people are faced with an unprecedented attack against their gains and rights. We will keep his ideas and fighting spirit as a very valuable source of inspiration in our efforts to promote the broadest possible fronts on a European level against neo-liberalism and euro-atlanticism.

**Alexis Tsipras**  
**President of SYNASPISMOS-Greece**  
**(Coalition of the Left of Movements and Ecology)**

*A meeting in honour of Ken Coates will be held in Athens  
on 21 September 2010, the International Day of Peace*

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**From the Union**

All of us here at Unite – particularly the former T&G section of it – were deeply saddened to hear of the death of Ken.

His contribution to our movement over so many years, and to the T&G, was immense. Ken was a man of great principle who never failed to take a stand for all that is of value in our movement. Many of us recall with admiration his work for peace and disarmament, and his efforts to keep the Labour Party true to its socialist roots. Had he been listened to more, many of the disasters associated with New Labour would surely have been avoided!

In the old T&G we owe a special debt to Ken as the co-author of the magnificent history of the union's formation and foundation. It set a standard for labour history that has never been surpassed and probably never will be, and revealed on every page his understanding of what makes a great working-class organisation tick. For that alone, future generations will thank him. All of us here would wish to be worthy of the great history he wrote, and the values he stood for.

**Tony Woodley**  
**Joint General Secretary**

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**Teacher and Researcher**

*Bill Silburn was Ken's Coates' close colleague at Nottingham University's celebrated Department of Adult Education.*

Ken Coates was a good friend of mine for more than 50 years. We first met in 1958 as undergraduates at the University of Nottingham and, between 1966 and the mid-1980s, collaborated on a sequence of teaching and research projects based in that University's Adult Education Department.

The published obituaries that I have seen have understandably concentrated on Ken's political activities, and his period as a member of the European Parliament. Only passing mention was made of his long career as a teacher; but for more than 40 years he worked, first, as a tutor, later as a lecturer, senior lecturer and, finally, as Special Professor in the University of Nottingham's Department of Adult Education. This was work that he took very seriously and with deep commitment, especially his contributions to the Industrial Day Release programmes that for many years were an important part of that Department's responsibility. He had himself worked

for several years as a coal miner and had an especially close link with the miners who for many years took part in these programmes. To his classes he brought deep learning and culture but worn lightly and always with humour; he was both a great demystifier and a debunker.

It is fair to say that within the University there were some for whom an important aim of the industrial release work was to encourage the most able and ambitious of the students to aspire to entry to Ruskin College, and thereafter a career in management. While Ken did not object to students developing in that way (if that was what they wanted to do), he had another vision of men and women returning to their workplaces better equipped to play a more effective role in their trade unions and beyond in the life of the wider community. It is certainly the case that throughout the East Midlands there are many men and women who have made and continue to make a valuable contribution to public life, inspired and encouraged by their contacts with Ken.

He and I started to work together closely in 1966, when he asked me to join him in an attempt to set up a study group to verify locally Peter Townsend's suggestion that during the post-war period poverty had actually increased, an idea that flew in the face of all currently received understanding and common sense. A group of 20 participants was successfully convened and embarked upon an enquiry, surveying a run-down neighbourhood (St Ann's) that was very conveniently reached from the Adult Education Centre, and if there was poverty and deprivation it was likely to be found in precisely such a district.

The outcome of this enquiry was the publication of a report, in 1968, that documented in detail widespread and multiple layers of deprivation. This report attracted considerable local comment (not all of it flattering or encouraging) and sufficient national coverage to lead to Thames Television asking us to help them make a documentary film based upon the report; this was made by Stephen Frears and screened in 1969. Meanwhile, Penguin Books commissioned us to write up the study at book-length, and this was published as *Poverty: the Forgotten Englishmen* in 1970.

The study group went on to complete a parallel study on an outlying council housing estate in Nottingham (this too revealed significant pockets of serious deprivation). In the years that followed different study groups carried out neighbourhood surveys in a Derbyshire pit-village threatened by the closure of the mine, and in a small town on the Nottinghamshire-Derbyshire border.

None of this work was noteworthy for its methodological sophistication. It made little or no contribution to social or political theory. Most of it was

of modest and often of short-lived local interest. But I know that Ken was very proud of this body of work, and especially proud of the Penguin book, and this pride tells us something important about Ken himself and what drove him to a lifetime of tireless political engagement.

He felt that the great value of *Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen*, and one of the reasons for its long shelf-life (its fourth edition is still in print with Spokesman Books) is that it gave a voice to people who usually went unheard, it documented social conditions that usually went unseen, and it directly challenged those who profited from the hardships of others, and those with power and authority who failed to act. Moreover he hoped that readers would recognize that the greatest of the deprivations were not the material ones, the shortage of cash, the squalor of the environment and so on, but the moral ones, the lack of effective choices in life, the deprivation of effective control over one's own life and destiny.

And this gives us a clue as to what made Ken tick. He was driven by a profound sensitivity to social injustice, and to the impoverishment of the lives of those blighted by injustice. He needed to understand how these injustices arose and how they were perpetuated, and he found both explanations and clues for action in academic study and in political theory, understandings that deepened and fuelled his empathy with the poor and deprived. In both his teaching and his writing he never lost sight of the individual man, woman and child on whose behalf he worked. He could always translate an observation about a structural phenomenon into its human terms, and felt simultaneously both its social and personal costs. Among the many influences on his life and thought we must include the libertarian values of Tom Paine, and the common decency of Richard Tawney.

Ken's death is a serious loss to the international labour movement. But for those who knew him personally we remember a charismatic and committed teacher, a deeply cultured and learned scholar, a humourous, generous and family-loving companion, and a compassionate friend and comrade.

**Bill Silburn**

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Ken Coates was one of the most perceptive minds and eloquent voices of the radical left. From the mid-1960s, for four decades he was a major influence in seeking to renew and give greater coherence to militant left politics. ... He won great respect during his 10 years as an MEP, not least for his work as chairman of the human rights sub-committee and his initiatives for an EU-wide Pensioners' Parliament and Disabled People's

Parliament, and a Convention for Full Employment, bringing together trade unionists and unemployed workers' organisations.

**John Palmer, from his obituary in *The Guardian*, 29 June 2010**

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### **Socialist**

*Michael Barratt Brown worked closely with Ken Coates since the 1960s. These excerpts are taken from his tribute at the funeral. They are followed by Bruce Kent's appreciation.*

Ken Coates was a socialist of enormous influence and talent. He was the founder and chief advocate of so many Left wing causes in Britain and Europe that just to list them hardly does justice to his energy and imagination – the Institute for Workers' Control, the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and its Tribunals, the Russell Press, the campaign for European Nuclear Disarmament; the Human Rights Committee, the Pensioners' and Disabled People's Parliaments, and the Full Employment Conventions, which all convened in the European Parliament, as did the Brussels Conferences of the European Network for Peace and Human Rights; the *European Labour Forum* journal and associated publications, *The Spokesman* journal and Spokesman Publishing House. To all these initiatives Ken brought a prodigious memory, massive erudition, a vast historical sense, and a deep love of his fellow men and women. His loss to the Labour Movement is irreparable.

What Ken brought to his leadership of these many movements was not only his knowledge and sympathies, but also a considerable oratorical skill and brilliant English writing, which he displayed respectively in many conferences and in the great number of books and articles which he wrote. Ken was a marvellous correspondent, his letters keeping him in touch with a whole range of people, from the Dalai Lama and Chinese dissidents to Noam Chomsky and John Berger, from trade union leaders in Britain and Ireland to those in Europe and beyond, from politicians in the British Parliament to those in many Parties of the European Parliament. His letters, like all his other writings, had a certain directness and firmness, always tempered by modesty and courtesy. We shall all miss his letters.

Ken's experience as a coal miner and the comrades he met among working miners inspired his teaching of miners who came to Nottingham University for Day Release courses in politics, economics and sociology. This in turn led Ken to the creation of the Institute for Workers' Control (IWC), which brought together in a succession of conferences teachers of industrial relations and trade unionists, including some in leading positions such as Bill Jones and Hugh Scanlon. The IWC won support among Labour politicians,

even among cabinet ministers, most particularly Tony Benn, but even others such as Eric Varley, an ex-miner, and John Prescott, a one-time seaman, whose studies of their trade union experience the IWC published. Ken even published Gordon Brown's most radical work, *The Red Paper on Scotland*.

Ken's output of books and other writings was voluminous. He was a great collaborator – in his early study of poverty in St. Ann's in Nottingham with Bill Silburn, in his magisterial history of the Transport and General Workers' Union and Essays on Industrial Democracy with Tony Topham, in his European Recovery Programme and his European Full Employment Appeal with Stuart Holland, in his study of the miners' *Community under Attack* and exposure of Blairism in *The Blair Revelation* with Michael Barratt Brown. Working with Ken was always exciting and corrective. His leadership was inspirational and demanding, as the loyal little team at the BRPF – Ken Fleet, Tony Simpson, Rita Maskery, John Daniels, Tom Woodward, Julia James, Abi Rhodes – would all vouchsafe. What they achieved with Ken will remain as his memorial.

Ken's honesty in all his dealings often made him an awkward customer. He was twice thrown out of the Labour Party, once for disagreeing with Harold Wilson over Viet Nam and then for rejecting the proposed arrangement for electing members of the European Parliament, which destroyed the constituency basis of representation. On neither occasion was he given a hearing to make his case. Long before Blair was elected Prime Minister Ken stated his objections to Blair's invention of New Labour and the rejection of the Labour Party's Clause Four, which advocated social ownership and the best possible means of popular control. In the years of New Labour rule Ken concentrated his fire through *The Spokesman* and other publications on challenging Blair's commitment to the United States war policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, and on exposing the destruction of human lives and abuse of human rights that were involved. It seemed like a wholly negative programme, but it had a positive aim to it, in keeping alive the hope of a different world. Without Ken it will be that much more difficult to build that new world, but we should here and now re-dedicate ourselves to that task.

**Michael Barratt Brown**

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### Comet

Ken was, like his sparring partner Edward Thompson, one of the great prophets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prophets are traditionally old, hairy, censorious, and short on personal friendships. Ken was none of those things. The twinkle in his eye and his infectious laugh are lasting memories.

I knew nothing of his political past when he burst in on me, like a human comet, in the very early 80s, with the END Appeal. He came to discuss ‘Protest and Survive’, one of the most powerful polemics I have ever read. Written by Edward, it was promoted and produced by Ken. It woke up a generation and encouraged many imitations – not least the Christian version – ‘Profess and Survive’. Out of all this came the European Nuclear Disarmament campaign with its aim of building a united, de-militarised, bloc-free Europe. Here at home, END did much to expand CND’s traditional focus on British nuclear weapons. But Ken was not just END. He was The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and Spokesman Books as well as being, until ‘they’ got rid of him, a Labour Member of the European Parliament. *The Spokesman* is a small magazine with a clout above its weight. I used to marvel in each issue at the way so little escaped Ken’s attention. Ken always knew what wickedness ‘they’ had been up to and he was well able to forecast what wickedness ‘they’ would get up to in the future. For one with bad eyesight little went under his political radar. He was of course more than lucky to have Tamara as his wonderful partner, and the strong support team he had at Nottingham. I will miss him as a good friend and source of advice. But as one who believes that the human spirit does not simply evaporate but, like great art and great music, has its own immortality, Ken somehow, somewhere, will go on pushing us towards a kinder and juster world. And if the Angels are not politically organised, they soon will be.

***Bruce Kent***

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Ken and I were expelled together from the Labour party in January 1998. Our crime was to oppose Tony Blair for his rightwing policies and his attempt to cleanse the Labour party of socialism and democracy; we were, as Ken said later, ‘a little ahead of our time’. In June that year, as president of the EU, Mr Blair was making his final report to the European parliament. He was somewhat discomfited to find that the two final speakers in the debate were Ken and I. Ken caused much amusement among the press when he began his speech: ‘I think the outgoing presidency should be called the Blair presidency in honour of a great Englishman. I refer of course to Eric Blair, better known as George Orwell, who described how the Europe of 1984 was governed by a Ministry of Truth in which spin doctors explained how the war being organised by the Ministry of Peace was always going well. The language of this world was called Newspeak. New Labour speaks this language to perfection.’

**Hugh Kerr, *The Guardian*, 1 July 2010**