

Act and Survive

An appreciation of Ken Coates

Stuart Holland

Ken not only was the best of my friends for decades and also a key influence in my life. He was the only person I have known who combined intellectual and political genius with a formidable ability to mobilise others on alternative agendas. His self-direction was phenomenal, but fame was not the spur. Nor was there a single mind-set. Part of his genius was intuitive lateral thinking and ‘coming up with’ ideas that challenged convention, whether of the Right or Left.

One of these in which we were mutually involved, with Jacques Delors, was the case for a Social Europe, which, at present, is being lost rather than won, and may end in disintegration of the whole European project, unless progressive forces in Europe follow his example and jointly mobilise.

Another, conceived and then mobilised across Europe by him, was the Campaign for European Nuclear Disarmament. Someone skilled in such arts should edit the Wikipedia entry on this, which both ascribes the initiative to others and also claims that it failed. It did not fail in mobilising hundreds of thousands across Europe in opposition to Cruise missiles nor in gaining conviction that a Europe without intermediate range missiles could be a nuclear free security zone.

I drew on END in making this case to the Soviet leadership before Neil Kinnock’s first visit to Moscow, and gained their agreement to a joint declaration by him and them that if a Labour government insisted that the US withdraw Cruise, they would not target Britain with SS20s and would agree to joint site inspection to confirm this.

They initially were sceptical of END since Edward Thompson had linked it with

Stuart Holland’s many books include Out of Crisis, The European Imperative, Towards a New Bretton Woods, and Full Employment for Europe (with Ken Coates).

his 'exterminism' thesis, which they regarded as anti-Soviet, if not a CIA plot. But, after several hours, they accepted that case had credibility for Europe as a zone without intermediate missiles since withdrawal of Cruise also was supported by the SPD at a time when Cruise were deployed only in the UK, Germany and Italy. Within which there was implicit logic. If the governments of two of these three countries would insist on their withdrawal the third would be most likely to do so since, in terms of what Bruce Kent argued in relation to Libya in his earlier tribute to Ken (see *Spokesman 109*), the third country would not welcome being the only target.

Another Ken initiative was of less strategic importance, but entirely consistent with his concern for individuals rather than only for 'grand redesigns' and led to the release of Ahmed Ben Bella. This is recounted now in what can only be a very limited appreciation of Ken's significance, in which serendipity and the END appeal also played a key role.

In March 1980, he rang me in London to ask whether I realised that we were approaching the 15th anniversary of the coup against Ahmed Ben Bella by Boumedienne; that Ben Bella had never even been charged on any allegations of misconduct, far less crimes, had been in prison until about a year earlier and since then under house arrest at M'Sila on the edge of the Sahara. Of course I knew of the overthrow of Ben Bella but little of the rest. Ken added that the government had said that access to him was not restricted, but journalists were telling him that it was blocked.

With typical understatement, Ken asked 'Don't you think we should pay him a visit, perhaps with you taking an invitation from MPs for him to address them on how he now sees the future of the Third World?' As usual, he had prepared this well. Some of Ben Bella's former colleagues had suggested that on the 'the visit', if we got ourselves to Algiers, one of Ben Bella's former colleagues would drive us to M'Sila. They also advised that we should be prepared to get arrested.

Ken suggested that if we were so, he would simply claim that he could not speak anything but English. I would use French to insist that we had taken the government at its word that Ben Bella was 'at liberty', that if they detained us when I was a member of parliament bringing an invitation from others it would cause a political outcry, and that at worst we probably would be sent packing after we had delivered the invitation.

Getting the support of MPs was not difficult. During one division alone in the House I gained some 120 signatures for the invitation to him to come to London. For many of them the only surprise was that he was still alive. On timing, we chose a weekend. I would send a letter to the Algerian

ambassador in London explaining that we would be bringing the invitation in person and of course counted on cooperation from the authorities.

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But we posted it on the afternoon of Friday April 18th as we were leaving Heathrow for Algiers, reckoning that this either might reach a duty officer at the embassy on the Saturday, by which time we should be in M'Sila, or not be seen till the Monday, by which time officials in Algiers could confirm our claims with the letter to the ambassador. It also was convenient that my passport described me as a university teacher rather than a member of parliament. We should be able to get in even if there was some question on how we would get out.

On arriving in Algiers we were met by a former close colleague of Ben Bella's in government and a former commandant of the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), Boussouf. He was short necked, thick knit, very muscular, and it seemed clear that, as later was said of Paddy Ashdown, he could kill a man with one blow. It also was more than probable that, during the liberation struggle, he had. In principle this was reassuring. We would be driven to and, hopefully, from M'Sila by a man who knew how to take care of himself. What should happen there was that we would arrive at the house in which he was detained at precisely 2.30 on the Saturday afternoon. He would already be stepping out of it and would accept the invitation from the MPs in the moments before we were arrested.

Slim, smiling and looking eminently presidential in a dark cashmere coat, Ben Bella walked down the steps. I gave him a copy of the early day motion and said to him in French that we would wish him to accept the invitation. He smiled and replied 'J'accepte, avec plaisir'. His wife Zahra, a former left wing critic of him in government, but who had married him in prison, wept with joy and embraced both Ken and me – as pandemonium broke loose.

While Ben Bella was descending the steps his government 'caretaker' was on a hand-held phone speaking volubly in Arabic and whose predictable logic soon was evident. Small troop carriers, which might have been Renaults or Russian, which was not our main concern at the time, but with troops with small arms and mounted machine guns, rushed to the house from lower down the street and placed themselves before and behind Boussouf's BMW. The officer in charge then said in French that we should get into the car and follow him. Ben Bella, knowing that we were prepared for this, renewed his thanks, smiled again and made a dignified return up the steps.

The short drive was to the prefecture of M'Sila. The French prefect system had been imposed on Algeria under colonial rule, and retained. But in a westernised Algeria, and on a Saturday, it was some time before the prefect could be found. We were separated into three rooms for questioning. In Boussouf's case it was an interrogation and he admitted thereafter that it had been 'hard'. In Ken's case it was a total failure since he beatifically responded in English to their questions that he did not understand a word that they were saying. In my case it prompted the response that they had detained a member of the British parliament acting on behalf of others and that there would be consequences for such a diplomatic and political error. As yet there was no explicit threat rather than evidence of confusion.

Then the prefect arrived and I was summoned to his office where he demanded, in French, what we were up to. I ran through our routine which was that the government had declared that the former and founding president of the republic was 'at liberty'; that we had taken its declaration seriously and sought to meet him. He then said 'who's behind this?' I passed him a copy of the early day motion with the invitation and signatures of the MPs to visit parliament to give us the benefit of his experience as one of the leading figures of the non-aligned movement with Nasser, Nkrumah, Sékou Touré and others, and his reflections now on issues of global development and governance. The prefect then asked 'who else?' To which I replied that, if Ben Bella were not seen to be free and also free to leave Algeria when and as he chose, there were hundreds more leading politicians and public figures across Europe who would condemn the Algerian government's claim that he was 'at liberty', and demand his freedom.

The response to his second question was mere aspiration. He paused and then said to me, 'Mr Holland, both you and I know perfectly well what you and Mr Coates are up to. You also probably realise that I have not as yet been able to gain a response to this incident from Algiers. But it is within my powers to require you to inform me of where you are staying in my country and also to require you both to remove yourselves from Algeria'. Where we were staying was of no significance since it was not with any supporter of Ben Bella, so I gave him the name of our hotel in Algiers, well aware that the security forces then might search it, but with no concern for what they might find, since it implicated no one. He then indicated that we were free to go, but must leave Algeria the next day. I said that I accepted this but that there would be consequences both from not allowing us access to Ben Bella and insisting on our extradition.

Ken, Boussouf and I then were re-united, which was when I asked Boussouf how it had been, and he admitted that it had been 'hard'. We were less elated than exhausted. We had got the invitation through to Ben Bella and he had accepted. I would report this to the MPs who had signed the early day motion. All seemed to be going well enough. Boussouf then started the long drive back to Algiers. It already was evening as he drove higher into the Atlas range.

I dozed off, while Ken was asleep already in the back seat. But I then woke up and observed that Boussouf was sweating, even though it was already night and the temperature was low. I asked him 'Boussouf, what's wrong?' 'Nothing' he replied. I went back to sleep yet then jerked awake when suddenly he braked hard and asked him again. He repeated the same. Yet this time I persisted and said: 'Boussouf, we knew there was some risk in what we have been doing. But we also assessed the degree to which the regime itself would be exposed if it did not free Ben Bella. Why are you sweating now?' 'Because they cannot afford him to be free,' he replied. 'If he were free tomorrow this would destabilise the regime.'

The presumption was to be proved wrong. His freedom did not do so. But Boussouf than admitted to me that it was on such precipitous roads with no guard rails, as I had observed in the morning but without concern, that the FLN would 'front and back' French troop trucks by commandeered heavy lorries, then tip the trucks and troops into the chasms below. I chilled and stayed awake for some time. But then, again, fell back asleep. When we reached Algiers, Boussouf drove us to our hotel. We both expected our rooms to have been searched, to no avail. But then Ken called me from his. 'They've taken the END list,' he said.

This was a list of the good and the great who had signed the END Appeal, which Ken had drafted. He had showed it to me on the plane to Algiers. It was so early in the END initiative that it had no dedicated stationery. It was printed out on blank A4 pages. But it started with Austria, under which the first name was Bruno Kreisky. It ran through to Germany, on which the first name was Willy Brandt. Other heads of government or party leaders had signed it. It then came to Portugal, where the first signatory was Ramalho Eanes, much less well known but a former army general who at the time was president of the republic.

It was remarkable that the security people who checked our rooms either had not had the time to photocopy the list and return the original, or had not bothered. The difficulty in getting through to Algiers that the prefect at M'Sila had admitted seemed to have taken such time that our rooms had been checked only at a last minute.

But the ‘lifting of the list’ gave us the lead on what then happened. For the Algerian government decided to release Ben Bella from house arrest and allowed him to leave the country. What had been mere bluff by me in the encounter with the prefect in M’Sila about wider ranging support for his release appeared to have been confirmed by some of the most eminent politicians and personalities across Europe.

When he was freed, Ben Bella spent a short time in Paris, but then came to London. I was approached by a leading figure in the Arab League who told me that he and Zahra would wish to be guests at our home. Clearly there was no problem. We welcomed them and they slept in our unpalatial spare bedroom. Ken also joined us, with clearly good reason. Since what had happened at M’Sila, and its outcome, had been entirely due to him.

When with us, Ben Bella also made plain that, without Ken’s initiative he still could have been at M’Sila, or elsewhere under house arrest, indefinitely. He paid tribute to Amnesty International, who had published multiple protests against his imprisonment and also then his house arrest, but added: ‘They did well. They protested. But you acted.’

There then followed an event which was Ben Bella’s first public appearance in the UK since his release, at the next Labour Party Conference. Understandably, it was packed, not least by many of the members of parliament who had signed the early day motion. Ben Bella spoke in French and I translated. But what he said was prescient rather than only retrospective.

Especially when a question was posed ‘In prison you learned Arabic and read the Qur’an. Are you now an Islamist?’ To which he responded, ‘I am a Muslim first, an Arab second, and then an Algerian. I am also proud to be an African’. There then was a follow up question from the floor: ‘And what of the Qur’an?’ to which he responded. ‘My friend, the Qur’an is the inspiration of our faith. It is not a Michelin guide to the 20th century’. From which now, in a new millennium, many might learn.