

BEN BELLA

*As we go to press, the death of Ahmed Ben Bella, founding President of Algeria, has been announced. We shall publish a full appreciation later. Meanwhile, we reprint the conclusion to **Stuart Holland's** account of his and Ken Coates' role in helping to secure the President's release from house arrest in Algeria in 1980. The full story appears in Spokesman 110 under the title 'Act and Survive'.*

'... Ben Bella 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 [inviting Ben Bella to London]. 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.'