

## A Political Life

*Ken Coates  
interviewed by  
George Lambie*

*Dr Lambie is the author of The Cuban Revolution in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Pluto Press). He interviewed Ken Coates on several occasions during the last months of his life in connection with research into political and economic developments during the 1970s, from which these extracts are taken. Conversation ranged widely, and we have selected four themes. The recordings were transcribed by Abi Rhodes and edited by Ken Fleet.*

## I

**Ken Coates:** Tony Benn embarked on a different trajectory from that of Anthony Crosland. He wrote a Fabian pamphlet [relating to industrial democracy] and it was not, in our opinion, very clever. But it represented movement in the right direction, and then, out of the blue, fell the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) work-in, and he went and put himself in front of it. From then on it all galloped away and that's when the Council of the Institute for Workers' Control were persuaded to meet him.

**George Lambie:** It was 1970?

**Coates:** 1970, something like that. They were all very agnostic about it. They thought this was a sharp Labour politician. That he was just like all the others and that we shouldn't waste much time with him, but gradually he won them over and we invited him to IWC conferences where the rank and file were equally hostile. He went into the lion's den and won approval.

We were excited about alienation because it addressed the fact that people had been totally disempowered and that even with full employment they were not fulfilled. This was not the future that we were labouring for. The human potential had been stopped. Blocked. It was no part of the scheme, and that is what we managed to communicate to Tony Benn, so he got the message, albeit briefly, that we were trying to connect. Not simply that workers' control is about the workers taking all of the decisions; it is about the environment being such that human development is the crucial

datum and not profit and loss. That was not Crosland's position.

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We had the referendum [in 1974] – the thing that is burned in my memory – we had the referendum and we lost it. We had all been campaigning against the Common Market.

**Lambie:** This is the referendum on Europe?

**Coates:** On Europe, yes. We had all been campaigning against the decision to join the Common Market and I went down to see Tony for the 'kitchen cabinet' that we had. I was there early and we were chatting informally. I said, 'I wonder, don't you think that now we have got to prepare contingency plans for what we think must be done at the level of Europe? Since we have lost this argument and are not going to be able to reconnect with it.' Because Stuart Holland, as you know, spent a lot of time trying to actualise what they call the Delors model. He was actually beginning, at the time of this referendum, *Out of Crisis [A Project for European Recovery]*. You know about this?

**Lambie:** Yes. He sent me the book.

**Coates:** *Out of Crisis* was a conflag of leftist economists across Europe. Tony Benn was not very smitten with it and he never really embraced it. He wouldn't attack it but he wanted to get on with the real business, which was seizing the commanding heights of power and influence in Britain. Now this is the difficulty with a number of actors when they have all got different goals, and the goals they have are not necessarily the ones that they proclaim. It is not that they are fibbing; it is that they have marked out their spaces and they've developed their political model within the space that they have marked out. That is how I see it. The deputy leadership was lost in 1981 and from then on the Left was on a downward trajectory.

**Lambie:** You see, from my point of view, but I don't know how accurate this is, because I'm looking at it from an ahistorical position, in some ways, by 1981, it was impossible to implement an Alternative Economic Strategy because the game was off: basically, the markets were wide open and capital controls had been abandoned.

**Coates:** Yes. I think that is right, but you see the Left couldn't wrap up just

because that was the case – you had to have a flag to put up even if it was a rather negative, refusing flag. It should have been put up but we didn't even do that.

**Lambie:** And that is where Stuart Holland's argument comes in. You had to appeal to European unity as Mitterrand and other leaders were starting to feel the cold winds of free capital movement and losing control at national level.

**Coates:** I was absolutely with Stuart on that and we tried to do that, which was why I got into the European Parliament. I carried Stuart's proposals through the Parliament. There were a number of lessons that nobody wanted to look at because Delors was also defeated and rejected; it was a forgotten episode. I thought through what we were doing and I was forced to look at the Christian Democrats as a phenomenon we didn't have in England. I started to go to their seminars – they celebrated the centenary of *Rerum Novarum* [*Papal Encyclical on Capital and Labour, 1891*] – so I began discussions with them. As a result I made this proposal to Delors that we should set up an Assize in which we ask the churches to interrogate civil society about how to implement the full employment programme in Europe. It is really rather important because Delors bought it. I sold him this idea and it enabled me to write to all the church leaders, the Bishops, in Europe – the Protestant Bishops and the Catholic Bishops – and I got them all together to meet on the agenda of the Delors' full employment programme. It was fascinating. The Catholic Bishops sent all these people from the Irish Church, the Jesuits, who were some sort of Latin American Marxists – I found it absolutely riveting. Anyway, we held these great big meetings in the European Parliament, in the President's office, and we had combined meetings of Catholics and Protestants. We didn't get to the Assize because the election took place and I had to push forward to take the rapporteurship on the Parliament's Temporary Committee on Employment that was set up to carry this through the official machine. So I didn't have time to follow all this through. But they followed it through! I had conferences of Jesuits all over the place. They came to Strasbourg and I found that I was at meeting after meeting talking to Jesuits and, of course, it spilled over into the Christian Democracy – that is why we carried Stuart's programme with a virtually 100% majority, because the Christian Democrats had a mandate from a higher authority!

I gave you that pamphlet [*An Assize on Unemployment*]. That has got the

politics of it in a nutshell. It's not a very weighty work, but a hell of a lot of work went into that and it showed something that, if the will had existed in the European Commission, there was a tremendous public groundswell in support of a full employment policy for Europe.

**Lambie:** What year was it that this discussion was taking place?

**Coates:** 1992-3-4. Getting all those clerics together clearly didn't accomplish much intellectually because they weren't capable of working out a strategy for a viable modern full employment policy in Europe. They had a very developed wish to succeed in this endeavour. There was an awful lot of highly intelligent people in and around the Temporary Committee on Employment who had professional interests at stake and they didn't make a fraction of the progress that the clerics made.

**Lambie:** So if the church had been behind this it would have acted as a kind of fellow traveller?

**Coates:** They were behind it, which is why the Christian Democrats all voted in favour of Stuart's documents.

**Lambie:** These are incredible developments. They could have diverted the course of history to avoid the misery we have today. Has anyone written on this?

**Coates:** No. I don't think so. You see what happened was that we were ambushed. We carried this through two reports in the Parliament – the second one wasn't quite as unanimous at the first, but it was a bone-crushing majority in each case. The Parliament's reports were not implemented by the Commission.

**Lambie:** It would be brilliant to set up a research programme on all this, the things you were involved in with Stuart Holland and Tony Benn, because it has been curiously neglected. Some of the people who were at the conference [on the 1970s, held at the British Academy in 2010] even suggested that a lot of the Labour Party documentation from the 1970s has just disappeared. They can't find it anymore; it has been lost.

The thing that was most disappointing about the conference was that there was no sense at all that the 1970s had within it the seed of a possible process of change in which the forces of global capitalism could have been

challenged. There was no sense whatsoever that it was a transformative period, which I found quite disappointing. I hold that the 70s were very important in this respect.

I wonder if you would mind if I asked you some specific questions about the Alternative Economic Strategy?

Stuart Holland's line on this, if I have got it correct, is that Labour's Programme 1973 was a pre-cursor to the Alternative Economic Strategy. Stuart made a significant contribution to this document, which he got through a number of committees – Crosland even attended a few of these. Stuart argued that to challenge the forces of globalising business, which was especially powerful in the UK (as articulated in his work, *The Socialist Challenge*) it would be necessary to establish stronger co-operation between the state and business on similar lines to the Italian state holding company [*Instituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale (IRI)*]. On his recommendation, a Trade and Industry sub-committee made a visit to Italy to have a look at how this system operated and came back with an enthusiastic report, of which elements found their way into Labour's Programme. Stuart believed such a strategy might have been acceptable to the revisionists. In fact, Crosland wasn't against this because it accorded with his idea of allowing business and the state to co-operate in a productive way, rather than nationalise 25 big firms or some similar proposal, which became identified later with the Alternative Economic Strategy. It was the noise of nationalisation that was picked up by the right wing press and used to the detriment of the Labour Party, and also frightened people like Crosland and the Right in the Party. So Stuart's view was that using this state/big business model, one could then establish under this umbrella more radical elements of Social Democracy. Stuart gave me a copy of Labour's Programme '73. I read it and, even though I am on the Left, I thought 'my god, this is unbelievable! I think Fidel Castro would have difficulty getting this through in Cuba'. It was an astonishing document and demonstrates just how far politics has moved since then.

Stuart's view is there wasn't an 'alternative economic strategy' at that time, really, it was just Labour's Programme.

**Coates:** Normally that is right. The Alternative Economic Strategy begins as a project from Cambridge rebels and they sent us a pamphlet and we published it.

They sent it to me and I printed it. I got it supported by the IWC council, which still existed in those days, and so when Tony Benn came to IWC conferences he would find quite a substantial number of people who were

thinking about it. Stuart is in the same category – it doesn't diminish Stuart's input in my mind that they came up with those words and outlined that programme.

**Lambie:** They were the first people to use those words?

**Coates:** I think so.

**Lambie:** As I understand it, correct me if I am wrong, first there was Labour's Programme '73, which is a wonderful skeleton for the whole thing, and then the Cambridge pamphlet in which a group of economists at Cambridge added their radical perspective on the implementation of such a programme. When you sent it to me and I first read it I nearly jumped out of my skin because it was extraordinary what they were suggesting; liquidating Britain's assets abroad; placing restraints on the City and a whole series of measures that would basically disengage Britain from the international system. Is it true that IWC members, including yourself, suggested import controls?

**Coates:** I never suggested an import control in all my life! Our view on these deep policy matters was that people made up the policies that they needed and if they needed import controls they would no doubt say so, and there would be people with their backs to the wall who desperately needed import controls. In the automobile industry, if they are going to shut you down, you might well look with favour on appropriate import controls, but we didn't see it as a matter of principle that there should or shouldn't be import controls – that was perhaps narrow minded – but we were in the position of encouraging groups of workers to make their own demands. Their demands didn't have to be right or wrong, they had to be articulated in a way that would enable people to form a judgement on them, and if there was going to be an argy-bargy about the import controls it would follow at that first stage.

**Lambie:** OK, so that was the IWC's position?

**Coates:** That is my position. The IWC was Kilkenny cats – there was a plethora of positions.

**Lambie:** When we were at the conference in London, Douglas Wass, the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury at that time, said that Tony Benn had been to see him on several occasions but a coherent programme for the

AES was never put forward. Does that make any sense at all?

**Coates:** Yes, that's right, there wasn't a coherent programme. It didn't make any difference whether Tony spoke with enthusiasm about nationalisation or not, the enemy had got its strategy worked out and they were going to damn it as a programme of nationalising every last sweet shop.

**Lambie:** I am sure that the forces it was up against were enormous. It is important for me to understand how the AES developed and how the Cambridge group fed into it.

**Coates:** Yes, but you see it spread out and drew to itself all similar movements past, present and future.

**Lambie:** So once it was established as the Alternative Economic Strategy it started to gather all kinds of suggestions coming from various groups on the Left, and building up a momentum.

**Coates:** Yes, and, because it is movable feast, there is no internal consistency in it – the consistency was that we were fed up with what we had got. They needed an alternative but they were pretty open-minded to the point of promiscuity about what would do as an alternative. Nobody had to sit down to start with and define the alternative.

**Lambie:** So there was an understanding that social democracy was under threat and that something had to be done, and this involved going down a radical path that would strengthen the controls over national level decision making. At the same time the more advanced thinking would involve an element of workers' democracy that would give it legitimacy as a genuine socialist programme.

It seems to me that the forces that were weighed against this were pretty formidable. First of all within the Party itself – Wilson was already shaky about it – a slender majority, the increasingly powerful Right in the Tory Party that was getting support from many quarters: the Treasury, the United States and so on. There is evidence of links between these groups. Then, by the time Callaghan became Prime Minister, it seemed that any strategy for radical change was out of the question.

**Coates:** There is a lot of information about Callaghan going to MI5 to

gather more information about communists in the unions and the origins of the unions' views of these matters. Now the spooks say that they didn't want to get involved in doing Callaghan's inner-party dirty work for him, and that they argued that this was not a function for the security services unless it directly impinged on national security.

I don't know what is true and what is not. I habitually believe that these people get it usually wrong, but perhaps I am mistaken.

**Lambie:** Tony Benn loses his job as Minister of Industry and becomes the Minister for Energy, weakening support for the AES within the Government, the Cabinet.

**Coates:** It weakened the experiments in workers' co-ops, but they were going to be stopped anyway, even if Tony had stayed in office. Tony must have been privately relieved that he was shuffled sideways because he wouldn't have to administer the killer punch himself, but they were going under.

I always thought that the workers' co-ops were a bit starry eyed, but I was very pleased that somebody had done it because it got everybody raising their sights and, having said that, it was very obvious that most of them were not going to survive in the marketplace and you couldn't reinvent marketplaces to suit so that many of these were going under. That was my view of it. Whilst they were alive we did what we could to keep them alive and to spread the message. I went all over the country preaching support for them but I think, if Tony Benn hadn't been sacked, there would have been some cathartic moments.

The area where there was a substantial workers' control movement in industry was in the mines. Tony called a conference of the NUM to decide on workers' control and it was fixed. First of all, I wasn't invited and none of the IWC people were invited, although we had published reams and reams of stuff about workers' control in the mines. The miners were all invited, it is true, but they were all very much under control. Peter Heathfield was a workers' control advocate, Jack Dunn was a workers' control advocate from Kent, and there were a number of others, but the conference took place without co-ordination of those people – we didn't know about it, we didn't have prior information about it. Arthur Scargill did have prior information about it, and came with arguments which I could trace back for 50 years to previous debates within the miners' union when changes of status were being discussed. Arthur argued that you couldn't have workers' control because it would be divided authority, that



you had to have a single fountain of authority so that there had to be a Coal Board as the unilateral authority and the Union as the unilateral opposition. It would be too confusing to mix their roles. That was his very stupid argument and why Tony bought it I don't know.

Tony as Secretary of State for Energy was, from an early stage, switched off from the argument for industrial democracy in the one place where it could have had electric results. You just think, if the miners had got a veto over hiring and firing decisions – that is elementary workers' control. The dockers had practised it for years on end. If they had got that, what would have happened to the miners' strike? I'll tell you what would have happened to it; it wouldn't have happened because there would have been nothing to strike about. They would have to get rid of the miners' self-government rights before they could introduce the measures that created the strike. That is, of course, why Arthur wasn't keen on giving them these powers, because that would make it more difficult to get his strike, and his model of socialist advance was 'everybody out on strike, Thatcher overthrown, red flag flies, glory, glory hallelujah!'

Many, many things have happened and they are not all bad. Tony fell in with Arthur on the miners' strike. By and large it required a lot of courage and it required a lot of dedication – as a strategy it was not very clever. It was pretty much bound to finish the way it did with the government putting the resources it put and with the unions possessing the resources they possessed. I'll give you an example: Tony came and he sat in the same chair you are in now on the day that he had decided that he was going to make an appeal to all the workers in England to come out in support of the miners – it was in December that year – and he said, 'I think we have got now to cast discretion to the winds and we have got to call on them all to stop the miners from being defeated'. Well, I couldn't believe my ears. I said, 'when you issue this call, Tony, who do you think is going to come? Because you can, in two minutes, lift people's hearts by calling for an audacious move, but what happens when nobody accepts the invitation?' And I knew nobody was going to accept the invitation because I wasn't in Westminster, I was actually teaching trade union classes in Derby and I had remembered so well what had happened when the miners' strike broke out. There was a huge flush of enthusiasm and my shop stewards all saw this – shops stewards from three foundries – and they were full of enthusiasm about what was happening, and how they took a collection for the miners and everybody was chucking in their five pound notes. It really was a moment of enormous exhilaration. Three weeks into the strike it all went topsy-turvy and what happened was the flying pickets came down –

and a boy was killed with a thrown rock. He was a picket, but it didn't make any difference; in the press there was now a huge campaign against the violence and it wasn't that the stewards turned against the strike – they didn't – but they described to me what they were doing. 'Now we have to take the collection privately. If we simply put the bucket in a place people would walk past it. They don't want to be seen contributing. If you go up to them privately and say are you going to give us a quid for the miners, they'll do it.' It did become a suspect activity. That was right at the beginning of the procedure and so, when Tony is going to call on the whole working class to come out, it was a no-no. There was nothing possible in that stratagem. You know where he got it from? He got it from Arthur.

I tried to persuade Tony that this was not the best contribution he could make, but he went and did it. He havered when he was talking to me but he went straight out and made the broadcast. We turned the wireless on and there it was – 'don't sit and watch it on television, come out and help us'. Instead of coming to help us, even more miners went back to work. That is a failure in generalship. I don't blame Tony very much for this because it is a failure in generalship of Arthur Scargill who, as the leader of the strikers, is supposed to know what his men want to do and can take. Tony was the leader of the Labour Movement and it was not his finest moment. If that had been the sum total of our relationship it would have come to an end, but it wasn't because of a lot of other things that we were doing.

The miners' strike was a trauma. It wouldn't have happened if Tony had gone with us on workers' control when the mining structures were being considered. If we had a classic workers' control regime in which the miners controlled hiring and firing, and in which nobody could be dismissed or downgraded without the approval of the workforce, then it would certainly have been an obstacle to Thatcher's procedures. Yes, she could have got over it, she could have annulled Tony Benn's Labour legislation, but then that would have been a rumpus that might have very well produced a universal miners' strike instead of a partial one. So, who is to say that might not have won? In any case, there are too many ifs and too many buts, and that is why I am not in the mood to foam at the mouth when I think of the mistakes that Tony made. But I think they were mistakes.

**Lambie:** What would you say was the greatest obstacle to implementing the Alternative Economic Strategy?

**Coates:** You have to have people who want it. You needed a socialist movement that believed in itself. The last time that looked anything like

real in Britain was in the period we were talking about when, possibly, Crosland, Benn and the other disparate group of people could, if they had seen eye-to-eye, have sold an alternative perspective. Even then there would have been a number of important people with strategic positions in the Labour Movement who would have died in the last ditch to stop them, such as Ray Gunter and George Brown, all kinds of people.

**Lambie:** Do you think there was a special moment, at the time of the IMF crisis [in 1976], when it might have been possible that Labour's Programme/the AES, could have been put in place if there had been a rejection of the International Monetary Fund's demands?

**Coates:** I can't say it isn't possible, but by the time that the IMF settlement had been reached I think that the game was up.

**Lambie:** I agree with that entirely. I looked at some of the cabinet minutes which showed that Tony Benn sought to promote what was essentially the Alternative Economic Strategy as an alternative to accepting the controls of private capital.

**Coates:** Yes, but he wasn't carrying ...

**Lambie:** No. True. But had Crosland, who was disenchanted by the demands of the IMF and said some quite interesting things – 'we have to stop paying Danegeld' etc – had Crosland sided with Tony Benn, he and his followers wouldn't have had anything to put in place, yet the Left did have a plan in the form of the AES which contained a strategy for challenging the powers of private capital that were controlling the situation. Rejection might have precipitated the scenario envisaged by the Cambridge group in which Britain would have been almost forced to consider the possibility of going it alone.

**Coates:** I doubt very much whether you can get that kind of agreement: you can't make a silk purse out of a pig's ear. Which heroes were going to stand up and die in the last ditch for going it alone. In the event even Tony Benn didn't die in the last ditch; certainly Crosland didn't.

**Lambie:** I think this is the biggest problem and Tony Benn identifies this as well. There was potentially a programme in place that could have diverted Britain down another route, and it says in the document by the

Cambridge Group that, if a major power – and Britain was most important in this respect – could disengage itself from the international system, this would disrupt the forces of global capital that were gaining strength at that time. I think that is true, but, as you say, the problem lies with the fact that there just simply wasn't the political will or understanding of the situation; it might have been right at the time but it couldn't have been implemented because there weren't the personalities or the politics to carry it through.

**Coates:** How would you mobilise? All this was an argument going on in the Cabinet. Even the closest followers didn't know the circumstances of what was being agreed and the likely consequences of their implementation. There was no broad debate – a little bit of a debate happened afterwards but that was all 'who'd have thought it'. I think that by the time we got there it was too late and I don't think it made any difference whether Tony Benn was Secretary of State for Industry or Secretary of State for Energy. He had a good run whilst he was Secretary of State for Energy and for Industry, but essentially this was to do with a loss of confidence by Wilson. Wilson didn't know whether he could get away with disciplining Benn and whether there would be a rumpus that would be too costly, and by the time that he moved him he did know that Varley would do as he was told and that Benn would not be able to resist. It was the fact that he moved Benn that was the mortal blow, that Benn was incapable of preventing this sideways shuffle.

**Lambie:** One of the things the Europeans perhaps felt was that acquiescence to the International Monetary Fund signalled a British left-leaning Labour Government had given way to external forces that demanded a change of sovereign policies to comply with what were ultimately the interests of private capital. I think European Governments were scared of this because they felt 'when is our turn coming' even though their economies were much more closed, much more controlled and they had kicked out a lot of the Eurodollar market activity from their own economies in the early 1970s. Much of this is hypothetical. I think, ultimately, we all agree, that there just simply wasn't the political support, the momentum, or the interventions that would have been necessary to implement the Alternative Economic Strategy had the government rejected the IMF. There were all sorts of problems. But I do think the moment was interesting historically because, had something like the AES been put in place at that particular time and got European support on co-operative capital controls, it would have been a big event!

**Coates:** Sure!

**Lambie:** The Americans were partly reliant on what was happening in London to finance the operations of their multinationals. US Secretary of State William Rogers commented:

‘We all had the feeling it [the initial attempts to deregulate finance] could come apart in a quite serious way as I saw it, it was a choice between Britain remaining in the liberal financial system of the West as opposed to a radical change of course, because we were concerned about Tony Benn precipitating a decision by Britain to turn its back on the International Monetary Fund. I think if that had happened then the whole system would have come apart – God knows what Italy might have done, then France might have taken a radical change in the same direction. It would not only have had consequences for the economic recovery, it would have had great political consequences, so we tended to see it in cosmic terms.’

What they were worried about was that, if the Labour Left shut down the London financial markets, it would be a real problem because that was where the axis of multinational power was based at that time.

**Coates:** And that is what actually called the next shots because they got a big scare in that crisis and decided not to have any more of those scares and that is why, subsequently – when Labour was defeated and Thatcher was securely in place – the Americans initiated the British American Project, which was a careful surgical attack on the Labour Left to remove anti-Americanism as a part of the British political firmament.

**Lambie:** Do you have information on this?

**Coates:** Lots. They set this up. They put huge amounts of money into this. They set up a network of American and British pundits and regular meetings, expensive seminars and permanent dialogue – one of the key men was Jonathan Powell. He is attached to the Embassy [in Washington] and then he’s Blair’s manager.

**Lambie:** Interesting.

**Coates:** Yes!

**Lambie:** And they also linked up to the whole ‘democracy promotion’ programme?

**Coates:** Yes! And this is why I can afford to be really very permissive about my comrades and realise sometimes all of us are going to make mistakes and we have to pick ourselves up and make the best of things, because you are up against a remorseless adversary in which none of these normal courtesies apply. The British American Project was Blair. They were not going to have a repeat where alternative economic strategies were bobbing out of the woodwork.

**Lambie:** That is really interesting.

**Coates:** Where would they come from, these alternative economic strategies? I don't know, it might have come out of Europe.

**Lambie:** Mitterrand was soon nipped in the bud, wasn't he?

**Coates:** In Europe we did a little revolution. When I was elected [to the European Parliament, in 1989] with a handful of other so-called pro-Europeans, we made a *coup d'état* in the British Labour Group. It was called 'British Labour Group' because that was the name given to County Council associations of councillors for their factional meetings, and so I put down a motion changing the name of the British Labour Group to the 'European Parliamentary Labour Party' (EPLP), which did two things at the same time. On the one hand, it ended the association with local government, which was downgrading the whole show; on the other, it claimed an element of parity with the Parliamentary Labour Party. Just as the Parliamentary Labour Party had claimed that it couldn't be instructed what to do by the Party *hoi polloi* because it represented the voters of the whole country, so the European Parliamentary Labour Party represented the voters of the whole country and so couldn't be ordered about by the party hierarchy. Well, they did a counter-revolution. They didn't change the constitution but they sacked everybody. They cut down the size of the EPLP from 60 odd to, I think, 13, by getting them all defeated. But there had been a potential for some kind of opposition. It took Blair to make that counter-revolution. It was organised by Mandelson.

In a way the Delors programme [of 1993 and later] was a continuation, precisely at the European level, of what we were trying to do earlier. From my perspective it was a very worthwhile struggle because it was too late in the day by the 1980s, the early '90s, to do a unilateral declaration of independence by one country. It would have been impossible because that country would have been smashed. But to have had a European-wide

response to the problems that were already being created by the free markets and globalisation would have been very viable.

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**Lambie:** Is Jack Jones still alive?

**Coates:** No. He died in 2009.

**Lambie:** Last year? I seem to remember something about him.

**Coates:** He was a great man, Jack Jones. He always supported us when we raised questions about Soviet dissidents and he also gave a prodigious amount of support to the idea of workers' control. He gave me powerful encouragement because I was in a lot of trouble in those days. I was on the wrong side of Harold Wilson.

It was the Vietnam War. I was opposed to the Vietnam War and I got expelled from the Labour Party. I fought a four-year battle to be reinstated and I was reinstated and Harold Wilson did not like it. Because, after I had been expelled, I wrote a pamphlet against Wilson's support for the Americans in Vietnam. There is a revisionist school of history that says Wilson never really supported the Americans; but he did, he didn't send troops because that would have cooked his goose. Wilson went down the line of least resistance and I wrote a pamphlet that was a bit rude. I went to town on him and there was one *bon mot* of which I was particularly proud, which was, for Harold Wilson, 'a straight line is the shortest breach between two promises'. It was noted in Transport House; Sarah Barker who was in charge of the internal secret police of the Labour Party made a note of all these things. The Institute for Workers' Control in the meantime gathered a lot of support, including support from all the main unions, and so when my appeal came up Ron Hayward was the General Secretary, and the union leaders were now cracking the whip on the Executive – there was Jack and Hugh Scanlon – and it was decided that I was going to be reinstated. So, there was a ceremonial meeting of the National Executive and Sarah Barker – the proposal was that I should be reinstated, which got the support of Ron Hayward and the union leaders and all the rest of them, it was more or less a formality, it was bound to happen – and Sarah Barker came to the bar – in those days she couldn't sit in the Executive, it is not like that now – but she came and stood and read her speech to the National Executive and the reason she wanted to speak was that she wanted to say that they shouldn't reinstate me because of all the outrageous and blasphemous things that I said about

our Prime Minister, Mr Wilson. Then she proceeded to read them all out and they all got the giggles because I was actually fairly candid about him and I hit the target. They were all pissed off with him because he was trying to bring in ‘In Place of Strife’ and this and that, so they were all squirming with laughter and, anyway, they heard her out and then they reinstated me. Later, I was very sorry for Harold Wilson because he got Alzheimer’s.

They did reinstate me, but the second time they expelled me I didn’t ask them to reinstate me.

**Lambie:** The second time they expelled you; what date was that?

**Coates:** 1997/8. It was when Blair had taken over and I had published a booklet about Clause Four, in defence of Clause Four. Of course, Clause Four included the best available system of democratic control and that had been our saving grace in the Labour Party that we could actually appeal to Clause Four. We were vigorously opposed to all of the managerial suppositions that went into nationalisation, but, none the less, when Blair came to rubbish it, I wrote this booklet [*Common Ownership*] to defend Clause Four and I was in the firing line with Blair.

Blair came out to Brussels to read the riot act because more than half of the European Parliamentary Labour Party signed an appeal that I had drafted in favour of Clause Four. They put it as an advert in *The Guardian* on the day that he was due to come on a fundraiser: he was furious. Anyway, it was clear to me about the annulment of Clause Four. The document they came to propose was rubbish. The authors of Clause Four, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, were not model philosophers but they wrote something which was internally consistent and cogently argued and sustainable. This new Clause Four was total rubbish. It was vapid. It was nothing and it was not intended to be anything. It was intended to get them out of the situation they were in. What they wanted to do was to be able to privatise everything that moved and everything else that couldn’t move and get very rich.

\* \* \*

## II Cuba

**Coates:** I don’t want to reminisce about Cuba, but I had enormous affection for Che.

**Lambie:** Did you meet him?



**Coates:** No. That is what I deeply regret. I met Fidel and talked to him and that was an extraordinary meeting. I went and was debriefed for about a fortnight and Bertrand Russell had a wonderful idea, which was that there should be an international brigade that was to go to Vietnam and he sold it to Sartre and they, jointly, proposed it to Fidel. They sent me to go and get Fidel's answer.

**Lambie:** That was a nice mission to be on.

**Coates:** So I went to get it. They kept me for about a fortnight debriefing me to see if we were crackers, to satisfy themselves that really I was representing Russell. In the end, I was taken – told to get up at five o'clock in the morning – and taken in a jeep into the interior and they gave me a set of fatigues because the jeep threw up a tremendous amount of dust. Foul. Filthy. I was with Ralph Schoenman [then Russell's secretary] and the pair of us were taken for hours, nine hours, maybe more, through really rough jungle roads. I can remember an eagle swooping out of the sky and picking up a long snake with its claws and flying away. It was the back of beyond. Finally, our jeep met Fidel's convoy with Fidel in front. He wasn't daft – he didn't drink all the dust! We were then followed by twenty or so jeeps who were on tour with him plotting whatever they had to plot and we just tagged on at the end. We drove for another two or three hours and we found ourselves in the upper mountains where there was a wonderful school perched on top of the mountain and the convoy stopped and Fidel got out of the jeep and welcomed us. It was like a Western film!

**Lambie:** You might have got as far as Santiago.

**Coates:** We could have done. It was miles away from anywhere. It was a pre-existing boarding school, which had been taken over by the high command. Anyway, Fidel invited us to go and get washed and meet him for dinner, which we did. Dinner was a long, long haul and they brought in roast pig, roast lamb, and people were invited to help themselves. We sat opposite Fidel with a very wonderful doctor and close advisor of Fidel's. We talked about Russell's wonderful scheme and Fidel said, and this is why I had been kept waiting about for a fortnight, he said he had heard from Ho Chi Minh to the effect that they didn't want an international brigade, and the penny dropped with me at once because I have got a funny kind of mind. Ralph Schoenman was absolutely spare about this, he was bereft, because he did want an international brigade. He was a gung-ho

laddie. He was a crazy so and so, but he had some merits as well as a few drawbacks. I could see this. I reasoned like this: if there is an international brigade, what does Ho Chi Minh get from this? He gets a whole bunch of rebellious students from Paris and London who can't fight and are really not much use.

**Lambie:** If it doesn't have the big media effect then it could be a liability to him.

**Coates:** That was the least of the problems. What does he do if he has got all these deadbeats trying to learn to engage the enemy in battle and ten thousand Russians and twenty thousand Chinese? And, if he allows them in, how does he get rid of them?

**Lambie:** Yes, exactly.

**Coates:** It seemed to me that that was the operative question. I have got the wrong sort of mind for this. Ralph was an innocent and he wanted to help the Vietnamese, but I thought it might not help the Vietnamese too much. This conversation lasted all night. It didn't start until a little while before midnight and it didn't finish until nearly six o'clock in the morning and it was a riveting conversation, but not the one we'd expected. We followed Fidel around the next morning. We were going to look at strawberry farms that morning. He was getting strawberries for his ice-cream parlour. He had opened a huge ice-cream parlour in central Havana, which was to have as big a variety of ice-creams as the Americans had got – this was very important, so we had to go and look at strawberries. There was a huge territory which was in a plain, that was now strawberry farms and we went to investigate them. We also called in on some peasants in the hills on the way down – really dirt poor peasants – and I remember in their dwellings they had got cast aluminium statues, one was of the Virgin Mary and one was of Fidel and they were hanging there on the wall. Anyway, we followed them around and Ralph had a bit of a fit about them not getting Ho Chi Minh's agreement, and he wanted Fidel to wait until he, Ralph, had gone back to see Ho Chi Minh and persuaded him otherwise.

**Lambie:** And by that time Fidel would have had immense international cachet on the Left. Ho Chi Minh, the communication would have been very solid between those two?

**Coates:** Yes. They knew what they were talking about. That's why they kept me waiting a fortnight.

**Lambie:** While they thought it through?

**Coates:** While they thought it through, yes. I think they were right. Bertie would have allowed himself to be persuaded by Ralph if there was any chance that it was going to happen; but he was very cross with the Americans and wanted the Vietnamese to win. The subsequent story – Fidel said to us 'we can't do that but why don't you help us with a project in Latin America?' It hadn't been announced at that time and we didn't know what it was, but it was Che Guevara in Bolivia. That was an ill-fated project.

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### III

#### European Nuclear Disarmament

**Coates:** Stuart Holland came into my life through the Institute for Workers' Control, which he found interesting. He did what he could and he continued working with his European connections to create *Out of Crisis*. I was not centrally involved in that but I was peripherally involved. I gave it what support I could, which was quite a lot. We published the book and I attended some of the meetings. Stuart went on to advise Willy Brandt with Jan Pronk on the creation of the Brandt Report. During this time I was involved in and happy to create European Nuclear Disarmament, which we set up with Edward Thompson, but there were two different views about what it should be. The idea was that since we now had the threat of Euro missiles, the installation of Cruise missiles and Pershing missiles all across Europe, that the unilateral perspective, which was suitable for British nuclear disarmament, was no longer adequate. Which is not a repudiation of unilateralism in Britain, but it is actually an affirmation that you have to create a European perspective; many of the European countries didn't have nuclear weapons, those that housed nuclear weapons were hosting other people's – mostly American. The east European countries were housing Russian missiles. So, we invented this idea of removing all the nuclear weapons from the continent of Europe, from Poland to Portugal, and to create a campaign for a nuclear-free-zone in all of Europe. Edward was less keen on the nuclear-free-zone idea because he wanted to concentrate on a popular campaign which would mobilise the masses. He wanted a new CND. At times he erred into almost thinking that you could create a serial

unilateralism, but we were able to work out that difference. My view was that we needed to create an inclusive movement of the parties of the Left and Centre, of such churches that would co-operate, of peace movements and the young. Our paths diverged because Edward concentrated on propaganda in England on the margins of CND, talking to the same audience essentially but widening the audience, because a lot of people found it attractive to think in European terms (a lot of young people). I concentrated on trying to get a European movement and we formed a campaign which was bringing together supporters for the appeal of European Nuclear Disarmament from the major west European countries. There were a few east European sympathisers. I didn't see our task as being to concentrate on European nuclear disarmament for the east; I brought all the people who came from the east into this discussion, but they were a handful. There was Roy and Zhores Medvedev in Russia, there were two or three other distinguished dissidents, there was the former Hungarian prime minister András Hegedüs and a group of students around him. I was in correspondence with the pupil of Robert Havemann, a prominent East German dissident communist who was under house arrest. We [Michael Meacher MP and Ken Coates] went to Berlin to see him and it so happened that we went on the day he actually died. There were a number of east Europeans who were endorsing this approach. Edward wanted to build a mass movement of east Europeans and Roy Medvedev said it is impossible, you can't do that. Well, it wasn't impossible, but it wasn't a very peace loving movement we created there, it was a movement of growing dissidents that accompanied the disintegration of communist control in Russia – that is a later story. The main work, that I was doing, was to build up the west European movement, which we did.

**Lambie:** And your capacity then was as a Euro MP?

**Coates:** No, I wasn't a Euro MP [then].

**Lambie:** Not at that stage, no?

**Coates:** I was an agitator.

**Lambie:** An agitator. OK. So this is the end of the '80s we are talking about is it? Or early '80s?

**Coates:** Yes, starting in 1982 we organised a convention in Brussels and

we got there, for the first time in one haul, a conference of a thousand odd people including the Social Democrats, and the Labour Party were represented.

**Lambie:** Where is the peace movement in relation to this?

**Coates:** Bruce Kent came. Lots of people from the peace movement were there. It was partly their show but there were also the main Social Democratic Parties, most of them just beginning to flirt with this. The Labour Party was in on the organisation – the Spanish Socialists, the Italian Communists, the Spanish Communists all came. There was a substantial political representation; quite a substantial church involvement and the major peace movements, which were not just the British, there was the Dutch IKV [Interchurch Peace Council] as well as the Belgians.

**Lambie:** Wasn't there the World Peace Council as well?

**Coates:** Yes, that was not us. That was a communist front organisation. We invited them to come along but I don't think they did at that time. That was the Brussels Convention and it was highly successful. Edward was very cross about it because it was getting a united front of Left parties and in-house organisations as well as the peace movement. We resolved to go to Berlin for the second Convention the following year, which was in 1983.

That was an amazing conference. It was the first time we had all Social Democratic parties, all the Communist parties except one, the Greens en masse – such as they were, Petra Kelly and all the other prominent Greens – plus all the peace movements. There were about 4,000 people at this conference throughout the day. They had some famous spats, the Greens confronted the Social Democrats; they went over into East Berlin and played silly buggers. I had to go and mediate, but it all passed off splendidly.

**Lambie:** OK. What was the central organising body of all this?

**Coates:** Us.

**Lambie:** As?

**Coates:** As the European Nuclear Disarmament liaison committee, which had been set up for this purpose. I was the secretary. Edward didn't want

to go to Berlin. He said it was a provocation against the Russians and we'd be crushed. He said all sorts of things. He just didn't want to be in a movement which had all the Social Democrats and all the Communists kicking into the same goal. I did want to be in that. We got Willy Brandt there, and we got everyone there and I think it was our finest hour. Because they not only went there, they managed to maintain an agreement for European nuclear disarmament – no nuclear weapons in Europe! That was big stuff.

One of the things that was big stuff was that it was fiercely attacked by Yuri Zhukov, the President of the Soviet Peace Committee. He attacked myself and Luciana Castellina [an Italian politician active in END] and a couple of other people by name. Edward was not pleased by that. As it was, Zhukov gave us the imprimatur so I answered Zhukov in some detail, and I answered him in terms of what was to become Perestroika. The thing then went on and we had a third Convention in Perugia, in Italy. A fourth one in Amsterdam. Another one in Paris. Another one in Lund. A lot of them. It was a working movement. As time went on, of course, it began to fall out. These things are inevitable. And the peace movements found that they didn't really get on very well with the Social Democrats or the Communists and the churches wondered whether they were in the right pot. There was a mass of trade union involvement. I think it was a big thing.

**Lambie:** Was this vehicle seen as having just the purpose of nuclear disarmament?

**Coates:** Certainly.

**Lambie:** Or was it also seen as a vehicle for bringing together the Left and the middle ground in politics?

**Coates:** No. It wasn't.

**Lambie:** It was just about nuclear disarmament?

**Coates:** It was about disarming nuclear weapons out of Europe. That is why it could bring all of these others together. It wasn't telling them they had to get together; that was implying criticising them for not being together. It didn't get into any of that.

**Lambie:** So they could rally around that common cause and that was it?

**Coates:** That was it, and they were doing it, and they were doing it continuously from one year to the next. And in between times we had a liaison committee which met probably four to six times a year to organise the participation. It had a big impact. All the Greek Left were there; Andreas Papandreou was there. All the Spanish Left were there.

**Lambie:** Was Stuart Holland involved at that time?

**Coates:** Yes, he used to come, but he was busy doing other things. He came because it was interesting. That is when I went into the European Parliament. I had decided that it was sensible to see if we could use that platform, which we could. Then Gorbachev came along and 1989 came along and The Wall fell down and the fractiousness of the peace movement began to know no bounds. There were so many things to fall out about and there were a few more that could be invented so that the falling out was rather general. I didn't engage in that. By this time I was in the European Parliament and I had to find a way to carry on the impetus of the nuclear disarmament movement.

**Lambie:** Let me just ask you, Ken, you are now back in the Labour Party?

**Coates:** I've been back in the Labour Party for decades.

**Lambie:** Yes, but you were expelled.

**Coates:** I was reinstated, I think, in 1969. By this time I was becoming, I'm afraid, something of an establishment in the Labour Party. That is why Kinnock used to think that I was alright – I was alright to represent him in China. I wasn't sure if I wanted to represent him in China. That is a different question. Anyway, that happened in the middle of all this. I took the European Nuclear Disarmament movement to China to involve the Chinese and the Chinese came. The Chinese sent a powerful delegation – a little delegation to Berlin and a big one to Perugia. It had got some momentum and I thought that perhaps the way to carry this thing on in the post-1989 world was to propose to the European Parliament that it should organise a joint session with the Supreme Soviet. They thought I was absolutely crazy, but we carried it through the European Parliament and Gorbachev thought it was a great idea. What we did was to make a common space between two emergent organisations – the European Parliament didn't quite know what its role was and was not set in its ways,

and the Supreme Soviet was discovering democracy, somewhat falteringly, but it was, none the less. So, Gorbachev put in a man called Zagladin, who was rather a splendid man. I got on with him famously. He was a cynical old bastard. But anyway, it was his job to organise the joint meeting between the European Parliament and the Supreme Soviet. We were running at it great guns. I had got the Socialist Group of the European Parliament who sent a delegation. The Christian Democrats agreed in principle to the convening of the joint session and it was all on the go. Then Gorbachev was kidnapped and Yeltsin took over and the Supreme Soviet ceased to exist so we couldn't have a joint session with it. Yeltsin wasn't interested in any such thing.

**Lambie:** You obviously didn't approach him because it wouldn't be worth it?

**Coates:** No, it was pointless, absolutely pointless. So that is where I think END stopped. END would have carried on if we had had the joint session because we would have had, as it were, a disarmament chapter. Life would have been different. We wouldn't have had the expansion of NATO into the former Warsaw Pact territories and we wouldn't have had the continuation of the Cold War, we would have had a different regime. I think that would have worked, but it didn't work because we got Yeltsin instead and they privatised everything that wasn't screwed to the wall, and the Social Democrats began their inexorable drift into neo-liberalism.

Not a very clever story. We didn't anticipate that, weren't ready for it, didn't know what to do about it. That is the background which I brought to Stuart's attempt to capitalise on Delors' white paper on employment, productivity and whatever the hell it was. Anyway, that is where I came from. The next thing I did was to run an offensive to get the European churches on board for full employment.

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#### IV

### **Bukharin and China**

**Coates:** I have been working through my reminiscences about the Bukharin case. As you know, I was very much engaged in trying to get Bukharin rehabilitated.

The Bukharin story was an important one. I was a friend of Roy Medvedev [author of *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*] and Roy corresponded with me. He still corresponds with me



but then he was regularly sending me things to appeal about and make a fuss about and bang drums on. Then, out of the blue, came a letter from a man called Yuri Larin. Yuri Larin was born Yuri Bukharin and he was a toddler, a baby, when his father was arrested and entered into this nightmare of a trial. Yuri was taken away from his mother and, first of all, put in an orphanage, and then adopted, and he didn't know who his father was. When he was a teenager he found and was ultimately reunited with his mother who had been in the Gulag and was let out when he was about 18. They were together again and he started appealing for the rehabilitation of his dad. He wrote to Khrushchev at about the time when Khrushchev fell, and they were messed about from pillar to post, him and his mother, trying to get this rehabilitation. Finally, he made up his mind after a decade or more to try to get the support of Berlinguer, the Italian Communist leader, because he was thought to be a liberal minded fellow. Well, he was, but he was also a lazy fellow, and he was also preoccupied with things in Italy. He didn't answer Yuri Larin, who wrote him a very moving letter. I was sent the letter by Roy and so I set about manoeuvring a situation in the Italian Communist Party that would get Berlinguer to be more accommodating. I launched a world appeal for the rehabilitation of Bukharin signed by dissident communists and not-so-dissident communists and socialists and all kinds of people. We got a few thousand signatures but in Italy I wrote to the decent old guard of the Socialist Party like Lombardi. They all signed up and caused a nuisance all over the place in the Communist Party. So they signed up, not Berlinguer, but all the important people and the Moscow correspondents and no end of people.

**Lambie:** When was this Ken, what were the dates?

**Coates:** 1978. That was the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the murder of Bukharin. After a serious inquisition Berlinguer asked the Instituto Gramsci to convene a conference on Bukharin and they got Stephen Cohen, who was Bukharin's biographer, and they invited a lot of people. I had to be invited because I caused all this nuisance. I went and it was a fascinating meeting. All the scholars were there, the people you would expect such as Alec Nove and Moshe Lewin, and a lot of very distinguished Sovietologists. But there were also all kinds of other people who were there for political reasons. By far the most important person was Su Shaozhi who was the director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought.

That is when I met Su and I made a beeline for him and I sat up all night with him for three nights. He took my pamphlet on Bukharin and

translated it into Chinese and published it in 70,000 copies – I never had so many fond readers – so Bukharin was well and truly rehabilitated in China, albeit quietly. It was important, it was a mixed blessing because Bukharin in China was Bukharin's policy on the peasantry, which had a mixed significance. In any case it doesn't matter, but rehabilitating Bukharin in China meant something very different from rehabilitating him in Russia. In Russia it meant freedom of thought and expression, open debate, and in China it didn't mean that, it meant a different policy towards the countryside. Be that as it may, it opened the door for me and I was invited backwards and forwards to the Institute of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. That is why I took Stuart Holland to China to sell his Brandt Report to the Chinese Communist Party. We connected this and the Brandt Report became a cause of the Chinese Communists and they went to a great conference on it in Peru, organised by the Socialist International.

I had been to China before I had even met Su. I met Zhou Enlai in 1971 and that was a most extraordinary meeting. I dried up completely. I had never been so overawed by a person as I was by Zhou Enlai. Of course, he had the whole weight of the Mandarinate behind him and he was so extraordinarily well briefed – a powerful man. Normally, I am not terribly impressed by power, but it wasn't just power in his case.

Nobody was allowed into China. How I got into China was a bit of a scheming thing. The Americans gave the go ahead for the overthrow of Sihanouk in Cambodia, and Lon Nol, who was an American puppet, made a *coup d'état*. Sihanouk was voyaging abroad and instead of going back to Phnom Penh he went back to Beijing and started a government in exile. I made contact with Sihanouk and offered moral support from the Russell Foundation. We thought that if Sihanouk could be reinstated this would be the beginning of a series of rebuffs for the CIA. Sihanouk responded and we developed a touching correspondence and, as a result, I was invited by Sihanouk to go to meet him in Beijing. So I had to be given a visa. It became a matter of diplomatic relations between Sihanouk and the Chinese. So, having got the visa, I drafted a proposal for a re-launching of the International Peace Movement for the attention of the Chinese, and that is how I was invited to see Zhou Enlai. It was interesting. He didn't agree because the peace movement, as far as he was concerned, was inseparable from his potty little communist parties, which were all at loggerheads; they were in a state of violent combat. So I can't tell you that this was a resounding success this meeting, although it was a fascinating experience, and it stood me in good stead for years because the Chinese knew I had

been to see Zhou Enlai and that opened more doors than you could possibly imagine.

I didn't go back again because there was no point until I met Su Shaozhi, and I went back with END. I tried to create a relationship with the Chinese and the European peace movements, which was the same agenda that I put to Zhou Enlai earlier, but this time we pulled it off. It didn't do us any good, did it? It was a very interesting set of experiences.

The logo for the Communication Workers Union features a stylized graphic of three curved lines on the left, resembling a signal or a wave, followed by the text "COMMUNICATION WORKERS UNION" in a bold, sans-serif font.

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# **May Day Greetings**

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