

## About Ken

### and some thoughts on the current situation

*Regan Scott*

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Pivotal people in popular and credible socialist politics, despite its sometimes bewildering and shifting '57 varieties', seem to possess one common and vital characteristic. They are the people to whom we turn to answer the time-honoured question: what is to be done? Ken Coates was evidently such a person, to friends, and, I suspect, also to enemies, who I have no doubt followed his public activities and writings very closely for their own nefarious purposes. Now we are without him we shall have to try to find some answers ourselves.

The need now for his natural leadership capacity is acute, for many routine reasons, not the least of which is the relative absence of left thinking and ideas and initiatives in this deep global financial crisis. This was just emerging when we collectively lost our Ken, so it is tempting, and perhaps a proper tribute, to try to imagine what he may now have been thinking and, particularly, with whom he might dialogue aside, of course, from his old economist colleagues Michael Barratt Brown and Stuart Holland, and his office team. That was certainly starting to be the case on the hugely complex issues of the global financial crisis, but there was, I believe, a set of prior issues about the structure of UK politics which had really engaged his attention as New Labour started to face a deserved failure and disgrace.

The set of issues can be expressed in simple questions: does the collapse of New Labour, and its assistance in eclipsing trade unionism, local democratic government and inner party democracy, mean that we have to start thinking about the prospect of an

independent socialist party? And while this question is not an unusual one in the big historical sweep of working class and socialist experience, it soon transformed itself and became acute and urgent through its close link to the arrival of coalition politics in Westminster.

Political fragmentation had started to engage Ken's attention some time ago, not in any sense as a proponent of multi-party government, but more as a thinker about New Labourism and its fundamental transformation of Labour away from being a socialist party of wide class representativeness. The factual collapse of New Labour and the arrival of coalition politics underscored what may have been premonitions and ruminations. I feel we have a duty to explore them now that we face a newly configured national politics.

That Ken would have grasped this new reality quite quickly and naturally would have been no surprise. He had the rare capacity of raising central questions and often reformulating them at many key points in his life of activism. He did it about party, about war and peace, about union directions, about jobs and popular democracy and much else. That catalogue must include his early and pioneering work about core poverty in the heart of the welfare state in the sixties when almost everyone else thought the welfare state was doing fine by its clients.

Exploring the new reality would also have come naturally and even with a welcome because he had been watching the disintegration of social democracy and the cul-de-sacs of many left revisionisms for many years, looking for breaks and rejoicing when new forms of opposition arose to ruling classes across the world.

The Labour Party futures dimension would have been home ground for someone committed to political principle and truth rather than tribal loyalty, with long experience of Labour Party disciplinary pressures capped by his final expulsion as an MEP for, in effect, systematic opposition to Blair and Brown. It would have been intellectually comfortable territory, too, because of the pioneering work done in the early volume of the Transport and General Workers' Union history (*The Making of the Labour Movement*) with Tony Topham and myself. This found that the great dockers' revolt of 1889 had given the true stimulus to the formation by the new general unions of a proper Labour Party, and also to its quick linear succession, after Labour's turn to constitutionality, to the creation of the British Communist Party. All of that, to boot, through a common cohort of union and political leaders exemplified in the career of Tom Mann. A political story and dynamic not in any sense in keeping with the mainstream view of the Labour Party's origins as solid, natural and

dominant and unchallenged within the working class. It was home ground, too, because of the experience of coalition and multi-party working in the European Parliament, where campaigns and projects cut through tribal party boundaries.

If the instinct for thinking about a new party formation after New Labour is accepted as a proper intuition about Ken's politics, the closely linked notion that coalition politics has arrived as the dominant structure of UK politics perhaps needs explaining and consolidating.

### **The arrival of core coalition politics?**

Now looking shaky, having lost its 'newness', the coalition character of the UK government is still structural. Party loyalists are arguably now the only people who can sustain the view that a strong majority single party can take power again. Even if, against the odds, a majority party were to take office again in the next few years, the conjuncture – the awkward way history works – requires us to factor in the likely loss of Scotland to the Westminster Parliament. That would be a seismic event, whether it occurred directly by a straight independence vote, or indirectly through the political instability of Conservative Party absence in a freer Scotland. Add to that a not altogether unlikely Conservative coup to cut off Scotland and run a permanent Conservative England: that presents a truly determining set of circumstances. Whichever way Scots nationalism plays out, a much atrophied Labour Party north of the border, already the case because of New Labour's demise, would result in a profoundly weakened English Labour Party, given its traditional Labour MP dependency. So, overall, a picture not simply of the arrival of coalition politics in the UK, but also of party break-up because of Scots nationalism and resultant structural problems for the actually existing New Labour Party. Some conjuncture, indeed.

If this stark delineation disturbs, it may help to recall the character of Ken's recent politics, recent in the sense of the period from the formation of New Labour and his electoral emergence in the European Parliament.

Ken's European troubles bear recall: having taken a radical stand (as we did in the T&G) on the necessity of a socialist turn by the UK labour movement to European co-ordination, he was eventually expelled by Blair and his trains of camp followers for espousing quite sensible and moderate causes such as European full employment, human rights, collective worker rights, popular democracy through European free assemblies (*parlements*), and crucially for my exposition, a re-uniting and restorative coalition politics across a broad consenting range of socialist groupings. A

restorative politics for the old Left, for honourable social democrats, for Green democratic engagers, for independent Marxist parties and the much reconstituted Communist formations, especially in Southern Europe. To make the point abundantly clear: Ken had experienced and thought through in his own trajectory in the European Parliament a different perspective on future socialist politics while other folk of goodwill in the broad socialist community were continuing to hope that a simple two party/two classes-in-conflict model of modern politics would return.

Ken watched it all, keeping dialogue with many camps and trends and currents, but he was acutely aware that the collapse of the Soviet Union as a huge, hard political fact had really shifted the political goalposts. No longer did the Atlantic consensus have to make concessions to social democracy in case disaffected elements in the working class and its organic leadership started to consider more socialist alternatives. The crossing of this huge political threshold meant for Ken not recrimination, revisionism, regret and allegations and calumny, but the need for a new organisational principle for class-based socialist politics. Time and again he talked about 'combined and co-ordinated action' in the European space.

The big picture was not a simple opportunist product of New Labour's decline. It was rooted in close attention to political trends and movements across Europe. He was a good trend spotter and, while harsh about abstract political speculation and posturing, the babies stayed in his bathwater. He relished political analysis and political speculation, but it had to be concrete and graspable and intelligible.

This view was about how a rather beleaguered socialist tradition in Europe in general, and the UK in particular, formed up into a true 'big picture'. It took some time framing and shaping, and was based on almost compulsive corresponding and dialoguing with colleagues and experienced figures in UK and European politics. While the Right were into mould breaking – that is, breaking the Left's moulds, Ken was equally hard at work. And of especial interest, the notion of the break-up of the UK's dominant two party and majoritarian political structures was informed by the experience of former colleagues in the European Parliament, and through watching the work of the clever team running Scots nationalism and the rather more elderly socialists in Wales ploughing good furrows against Westminster and New Labourism in recent years.

There were echoes, to those who knew them, across most European countries of these breaks and experiments and trials. Ken knew them, followed them and found sustenance in them. They were the considerations that led him away from political retirement and isolation, or

seeking Labour Party re-entry after he was expelled by New Labour. He joined a European coalition whose own politics were grounded in the twin facts of socialist commitment and the need for combination and co-ordination. This formation, the GUE-NGL (United European Left-Nordic Green Left) was not the only offer on the table. But it was the one which was historically proper and structured to fit his analysis and instincts.

### **Two missing cultures compound the challenges**

Discussion and dialogue around this emerging picture often lit upon two other areas of change which needed to be faced and understood. It was recognised that they were important, even if it was not always clear exactly how they fitted into the big picture. That they were both secular trends in advanced capitalist democracies was obvious, as was the fact that both were more advanced – or regressed – in the UK than in many other countries.

One was the decline of an independent model of political democracy that had historically been embodied in the workings of the Labour Party within the confines of capitalist parliamentary democracy.

The second was the atrophy of public service and public sector culture, linked both to the virtual disappearance through privatisation of publicly owned industry and enterprise, and to the marketisation of direct public services at both national and local government levels.

Though only starting to be glimpsed as big issues, there are good grounds for thinking that Ken would have grappled with them and come up with some sort of project or initiative to explore them and seek progress. Discussion did cover ways for the NHS to be re-invigorated by a new, embracing self-management: an adaptation of the workers' control and industrial democracy agendas of the 1960s and 70s. And recent Spokesman publishing has covered sales of public assets and housing issues, in particular. I offer for discussion a few observations about them.

### **The Labour Party – a democratic party and constitutional force, or an electoral device?**

What had become the problem with Labour's inner party structures? That they have changed profoundly cannot be questioned. And even more, perhaps, in inner party democratic matters than in the huge loss of core principles through the effective abolition of Clause 4. Ken and Michael Barratt Brown were amongst the first to see the full significance of the Blair/Brown attack on the Clause 4 public ownership principle. But what was not so clear at the time was that, once this basic policy and principle

had been conceded to leadership prerogative, the whole of the traditional structure of policy-making by the membership who subscribed to party rules and principles simply went on the slide. Effective MP accountability to local parties soon disappeared; resolutions from local parties went nowhere; Labour MPs were barred from writing their own letters to constituents about policy issues; Cabinet government atrophied with a Prime Minister frequently not attending, preferring his office coterie. The ultimate logic, especially piquant for Ken and the Russell Foundation's peace work, was the apparently entirely personal decision of Blair to back Bush's war. The contrast in our lifetime is stark: Wilson faced Cabinet resistance sufficiently authoritative and a Party structure sufficiently powerful and independent that he dare not support the US in Vietnam with troops. To jump to life after Blair and Brown, the new New Labour leader has initiated a 'policy review' involving outside experts and establishment figures in an exercise which does not even seem to be nominally based in the Party's much reduced rank and file.

There were many huge changes. Electoral strategy took over policy formation and it was passed to focus groups and backroom experts; political heritage and obligation fell under the axe of the Milibands in their Downing Street think-tank, which required an innovatory future for all policy. The innovation principle meant that no past policy ever saw the light of day. Political tactics were replaced by a principle, if that is a proper term, of political triangulation, which meant that winning was what mattered, rather than sustaining and progressing a core issue. Brown got into bed with the bankers, distanced government monetary control from government itself, and prepared to survey and sell the nation's assets – the Domesday Project – with no mandate from either people or party, or indeed, as far as I know, from Parliament itself.

Electoral advantage, presidential political style, media power and a marketised, consumer culture moulding the parameters of political choice – whatever range of factors is explored to explain the change in the broader political process, it is hard to see how the Labour Party itself could now be in any sense an independent contributor to basic democratic life. That role had been, of course, in the view of many classical socialists and, more importantly, in active labour movement life, both a hallmark of socialist development, an ethical guarantee of basic socialist values in their own right, and a steadfast bulwark against ruling classes and their anti-democratic instincts. It was, inside the Party, the rock of democracy itself and the guarantor that Party leaders in power would represent, not just rule. That the Labour Party was a constitutionally plural party made up of

balanced but asymmetric parts – core membership, collective union membership, and local government representation alongside parliamentary and socialist society elements – has virtually gone. It has become a parlous situation, obvious to socialists within and without the New Labour Party. Surely it follows that there is a new political fact in the labour movement, albeit an uncomfortable one for many people. It is that no Labour Party worth its name can be re-invigorated without a massive constitutional revival and re-inclusion of its several bases. One rose joined by however many other roses simply cannot add up to a flame, a sword and pen, for those who recall the iconography of our heritage.

The context and shape of contemporary political democracy is no aid either in the UK, though European parties seem to have held on to their constitutionalities much better. In the UK, Scotland and perhaps Wales apart, party democracy is weak across the national political structure. It has already been shown, very quickly, to be a far from robust animal in the Liberal Democrat Party, which had vaunted this dimension of its political culture. As the coalition programme crunches express and prominent commitments, for example, on student fees, parliamentary democracy looks to be vested more in the veto power of the electorate against majority party government than in the inner strengths of party democratic culture.

With such an overwhelming devaluation of democratic process in our public politics, perhaps a labour movement revival of inner party democracy could become an asset, rather than a liability in future, or is that too much to hope? For traditional socialists, inner party democracy was always a primary asset, however contested and pressurised it always was in the actual workings of the Labour Party. That said, the fact of the matter was that it *was* contestable under Citrine constitutionalism. That tradition was an operating pillar of trade unionism and local government, too, a connector, a transmission belt to working class political formation and the credibility of collective and unifying politics.

I think Ken had seen the seeds of political corporateness and authoritarianism growing in electoral politics a long time ago. His taste for free standing initiatives, for mobilisation and workshop debate, and open witness tribunals was frequently a counterpoint to the deficiencies and distortions of that strong old constitutionalism; for all that it would be an asset if it could be restored. How far back are we now when, in the New Labour party, throughout reconstituted local government and many other institutions, democracy and accountability are hardly spoken of. Even basic public information has to be wrenched from the hands of the powerful by a freedom of information law calibrating what ought to be

matters of basic and unquestioned freedom. It seems that as ordinary people have lost their party and their voice, a new world of rights and law had to be invented as a countervailing force. That has to be welcomed, but as Ken knew only too well, it has not been a development that organises and mobilises: collective rights, and effective social rights, as modern unions know only too well, do not flow at all easily from legal processes and even basic human rights.

Although New Labour's former acolytes and proponents and backroom experts now freely talk of its 'demise' and 'decay', we should not be fooled. It was not just a 'third way' project which has run its course. What has been left is a substantial erosion of traditional labour movement assets, directly, deliberately and perfidiously caused by New Labour's hollowing out of a long British socialist heritage. This was an asset destruction of consequence internationally as well as domestically. It has been a development in UK politics much prized by longstanding American political strategy for transforming its major English-speaking ally's socialist party into a Democratic Party mould. If UK unions are now hard pushed to lay claim to the title of world home of trade unionism, the residual Labour Party must surely be in an even weaker position to claim credible title in the Socialist International, for all the doldrums of European social democratic and traditional left party politics.

### **Two structural changes: public sector and public service culture**

Changes in global politics and the not unconnected changes in UK Labour Party structures and politics have evolved alongside other changes in the historic balance sheet of socialist experience. Of special note, I think Ken would count as crucial and complex and challenging the savage atrophy across society at large of the actual operating experience of public service and public ownership of industry and services.

The hollowing out and, in many cases, virtual elimination of public sector and service institutions in UK society and economy has been contested and challenged, and rightly so, not least by unions in the direct public services. These are vital struggles, but much of public culture, assets and worth has gone. It is this change which needs to be understood. The question can be put simply: what has been the effect of these huge structural reconfigurations on public consciousness of political and economic alternatives to the market society? As political generations age and new ones come along, traditional and largely popular experience of public ownership and public service can be seen as declining to a nostalgic

minority experience. Their traditional roles erode as the stable, secure alternatives, withering away as the social anchors against a totally marketised way of life.

An example of the cumulative political effect is the banking crisis and economic slump. While the traditional Left's absence of effective policy alternatives has been widely noted, what may be equally if not more important is that the public at large does not seem to know that alternatives do exist and have actually existed. Angry and disabused they may be, but what natural presence has there been for different approaches to financial organisation and services? For public ownership and control interventions, for public investment and economic planning in place of huge subsidies for the very rich and powerful echelons of global capitalism whose greed has caused the crisis ?

The perception that there is an historic and structural problem here needs to be pursued, not least because so many actually committed and experienced socialists within the traditional labour movement seem to think it is entirely obvious and publicly visible that nationalisation itself might well be the solution. Well it might, and they would be right. But if large swathes of the working class and other ordinary segments of the electorate – the 'squeezed middle' for example – actually knew what it had meant and could mean today, the situation would not be, sadly, as it is.

The reduction of the scope of public service culture has been very profound, and more extensive in the UK than in many other countries. Public services are now composed largely of funded and budget-capped agencies run on market lines, working to consumer industry standards and modes. Look at the old core state-owned economic sectors and their traditional voice. They have gone, almost all privatised, except for nuclear generation and, for the time being, the postal services; and, as if to illustrate the point, the only exception a desperate but utterly pragmatic restoration of railtrack to public ownership at the taxpayers' expense.

I feel less able to set out the possible political culture aspects of globalised production and the concomitant loss of manufacturing industry in the UK and rich West at large, but instinctively feel that the loss of cultures of production to be replaced by cultures and labour markets of services and commodity exchange is of considerable importance. Perhaps this dramatic shift in our economic life should count as a third structural change. Its scope and scale have been extraordinary, challenging traditional concepts of economic management such as 'the commanding heights', influencing ownership and control in the national interest, stakeholding, social responsibility and social partnership – a catalogue

extending from traditional socialist terms to the fashionable discourses of today. How real might they be in our changed economic conditions?

In the UK, and mirrored in much of Europe, de-industrialisation, which includes de-nationalisations such as the end of coal production, has left a tiny manufacturing base owned by foreign companies, except in military related areas which, in any case, are now internationally collaborative. Employment has shifted to market services. Unemployment and under-employment are deeply embedded. That's economic fact, and reasonably well understood.

What has not been understood, I fear, has been the effects on what used to be called 'consciousness', on cultural and community authority for production skills and the gravitational experiences of working people. What sort of social voice can the residual workforce exercise from the now narrow and often élite skill base and experience of marginalised production industry? What of the experience and voice of the much vaunted partners and stakeholders – workers, managers, investors, pension funds, and so on — in private companies in national political culture, when the big employers are retailer and service providers working frequently in very insecure and fragmented labour markets? And at ownership level, how can anyone identify with, engage with and formulate coherent protective and positive relations with companies whose managers are often simply of the high salariat and whose owners are fluid, international and impersonal? When one half of European corporate equity suffers ownership change in the equity and corporate bond exchanges every single day when the markets are open, who is the employer, who is the owner? It is not just labour law that needs to seek answers: labour movement organisation, politics and economic thinking need to face the structural challenges.

In our living communities, local government has been marketised, outsourced and agencied; its elected leaders become budget-constrained, executive commissioners, not accountable popular party leaders. Without primary accountable democracy and directly run services, how can ordinary communities make their voices heard and win resources for decent common lives? What of national economic strategy for jobs and sustainable growth when the British economy owns and places more capital abroad than it does in its home nation, and when the vast substance of national enterprise is foreign owned? And the bulk of corporate profit for multinationals is made from their foreign markets? What about Britain's unique NHS, due now to become a franchised brand 'delivered' by any willing provider under open market prices? Have we understood the change in culture and experience of an NHS which is no longer a common 'state' family of endeavour, and soon to become something like

a Boots and Tesco NHS with hospitals branded by separate signs for ‘customers’ and private ‘clients’; no longer the ordinary and universal patient in need?

What Ken had come to understand, I think, is that there was a whole range of fundamental political work to be done to re-establish socialist knowledge and credibility. That there has been a vast transformation of what might be called political culture, that needed to be assessed and agendas of change and alternatives formulated. How that might happen is not at all clear, but the principles of popular control and producer/worker control that mushroomed into labour movement life in the sixties and seventies deserve revisiting. Political conflict then was crowded, busy, chronic and crisis prone, and sometimes fast moving. I think Ken felt that it could be like that again. For all of the sheer scale of the challenges, and the need to understand them rather than deny them, he had a strong sense that political movement was subject to countervailing forces.

### **A political methodology within the heritage?**

Part of ‘what-is-to-be-done’ for Ken was always, of course, straightforward: it was following, supporting and participating in the natural, basic processes of protest and opposition generated within the broad labour movement. The other part was more difficult, and core to the Russell Foundation tradition, which has typically participated in the mainstream of struggle and also tried to be a political pioneer and creative mould-breaker.

If there were an already-existing responsible and open labour movement debate – and debating structure – about what now needs to be done, I think Ken would have been busy at work exploring an array of approaches and ideas and initiatives. I have sketched some substantive issues and understandings which would have been, I believe, central to an emerging analysis. But to do his heritage justice, I think his distinct methodology and approach to politics deserves to be laid out to supplement what is obvious from the issues already discussed.

Little more than notes, this last section of an appreciation of his work requires a stylistic defence. Ken was frequently irritated by political analysis set out in bullet-points and numbered items, by formal ideas and programmatic thinking, preferring a silken and well-informed prose of discursive argument. But, despite his own high standards of writing, exposition and argument, he would sometimes recognise the merits of mechanical and pedestrian contributions by the less mercurial members of his team and many associates. I risk standing accused of that literary crime

in the following rather plain notes. He was a hard task-master in the matters of argument and writing, and insisted that publication and the distribution of ideas, often through small vehicles, was an essential force in socialist political life. In the context of the debate about the future of New Labour, it needs to be recalled that he took on editing and publishing *New Socialist* for the Labour Party when its leaders no longer wanted the magazine: he started *European Labour Forum* magazine when much of the old Left was unreconstructed about Europe and labour leaders were following Atlantic and City of London mandates on the European Union.

But perhaps the most precious and distinct aspect of his approach to politics, a kind of methodology – not a term he would like at all, incidentally – was a grasp of the changing forms taken by important and principled issues as they evolved under political pressure. This cognitive capacity led to many innovations which developed existing issues rather than revising or rejecting them or avoiding them.

The Russell Foundation's signature working methods can be seen as consisting in a primary political *Gestalt* which always linked a big political picture with questions of connection to social bases of action and mobilisation. The mechanisms of activism were logically linked: networks of endeavour and open political debate and quality discourse. These were worked out alongside, but independently of, party organisation, but were also always closely related to party trends and political configurations. Institutionally, there was always a sense of the primacy of work organisation and the potential of strong and developed union politics, rather than the more mainstream view of the limited political culture of unionism. The relative independence of trade union political thinking was a precious asset of labourism. Geographically, there was a sense that European level organisation is an irreducible requirement of engaging with geopolitics and American dominion, particularly in British politics, even when the locus of direct conflict might be in Asia, or the Middle East, or South Central Asia.

Some of these approaches can be formulated more closely, and as such, may serve as guides for future work.

### **A principle of political development**

The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, boosted by Ken's outlook and insights, was from the very start committed to radical understanding, including where necessary, and not always in line with the mainstreams of opinion, the consequences and characteristics of political change. It lit upon blocked developments in politics, falsely limited horizons, restoring

principles that had been lost or set aside, speaking truth to experience. The Institute for Workers' Control was a political correlate to rising, mass unionism needing a voice outside formal Labour politics and a transformative vision beyond wages at the workplace. This work supplemented the analytical writing on trade unionism and its politics, but went further, adding an essential dimension to the struggle, configuring it differently to the impressive but limited mainstream. The END movement (European Nuclear Disarmament) strategically enhanced a locked-in British/American politics by opening up European territory just at the time when Cruise and Pershing missiles required placement on continental shores to reach their targets. Not against CND, but opening up a development of equivalent substance to the formation of the Committee of 100, which Russell helped establish in 1960. With the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, a European Left, and its European Left Party, started to occupy issues and develop agendas blocked by New Labour's stranglehold over Labour Party democracy in Britain and suppressed by European social democracy. This development, in turn, reconnected a strand of UK labour politics to the radical side of the European labour movement, taking us out of the earlier divisive and inward-looking impasse of Euro-communism. Earlier, and famously, the Russell Tribunal on War Crimes in Vietnam outflanked policy debate in the Labour Party, opposing the zero sum game of withering amendments of amendments and perfidious Parliamentary Party stratagems with a ferocious exposure through public examination of American dominion.

These examples show that political analysis and problem-posing could produce relevant and effective projects. In this persistent mode, Ken was not always correct about outturns, not always easy to argue with, but the method was a dynamic that led him, time and again, to develop initiatives and see them into organisational and, most importantly, mobilisation form. After that, history was the decider, of course, and while 'success' is not an easy term to apply to the great history of defensive and resistant struggles of socialist forces, these initiatives normally made a difference. They moved the cog wheels of history one or two notches forward, in stark contrast to so many formal socialist revisionisms and new approaches.

### **The big picture: American geopolitics**

One of Ken's assets was a capacity to see the likely shape of big picture politics early on, and clearly, as political periods and epochs – the collapse of the Soviet Union – unrolled across the world. In his period, and ours, popular socialism saw some lifts and occasional brighter prospects, but

many important assets were set aside and destroyed in the neo-Conservative era, and put far from easy recovery through what, in my trade union world, was called ‘moving the goalposts’. The creative source of capitalist politics was always properly identified as the United States, whose own Left and dissenters were closely followed by Ken for their insights. But the axial role of the UK within the American empire was never far from his mind. It was not a global pessimism: so, the European socialist heritage was an irreducible part of the global algorithm, a kind of constant if very conditional potential for better things, and an essential referent for any UK political progress. As formal Europe seems immersed and threatened by crisis, no return to a socialism of Little England would have been in any way credible to him, though he had no illusions either that Brussels was where socialist politics might break out.

### **The irreducible base**

While fascinated with high politics and trends, the formulation of his active politics did not involve élite interventions and the pursuit of high, élite influence, unless it could be used for express good purpose. The high moment of political processes was the movement of the base, not the posturings of the summit. Both levels have their own explanatory history, of course, but Ken’s peculiar insight – or was it just hard experience? – was that the issue was not the problems of the base, or even the unattractive prospect of high struggle against often massive odds. The parameters of both could be quite wide and uncertain. The political issue was always what the connectors were, how a spark might travel outwards and upwards, how a conveyor belt – be it union organisation at branch and district level, or networking — how they might start bigger scale movements with a capacity for challenging where power really lay. Nothing unusual in formal political process theory here, but, sadly, a rare beast within labour movements. It is surely a partial explanation of why Ken was held in such high esteem by many traditional left leaders, especially in the unions, and not least in my union, the T&GWU. He had the knack, as an independent socialist with unquestioned and substantial inside experience, of somehow daring to shoot at the moon: it was a privileged position, I believe, which he earned and engineered. I recall fondly a comment from a meeting some years ago with the then T&G Deputy General Secretary, Jack Adams, in the Derby T&G offices: ‘He’s amazing – he never gives up, does he’. Need one add the gloss that this was not referring to political convictions! It related to the persistent aspiration to connect and engage.

## Open dialogue and workshop organising

That dynamic could have played out in sectarian politics. Such a cul-de-sac was entered by many fine and committed people. Its seductions are strong, especially for people like Ken with more than adequate formal constitutional experience of socialist politics (early TU, CP, 4<sup>th</sup> International, and so on). That energetic apprenticeship happily produced an opposite effect: he came to set great store by spontaneous and open workshop politics, as opposed to the membership meetings run with Citrine constitutionalism and a world of final politics amended by yet another string of amendments. Democratic centralism must have felt very much the same as Citrine standing orders. But whatever their necessities and force, they often seemed to him, I think, to create more in the way of political manoeuvre than real political movement. For Ken the political problem was political movement, not political amendment. Like some of my better bosses at the T&G, he mused about how it might be possible to get all the rabbits in the field to run in a common direction, or perhaps, in the greyhound racing season, how to get the dogs to scent the rabbit. The big, positive vision was always of some kind of mobilisation, rather than the attainment of a paper-based, or administrative or even legislative compromise compressed into a professional, technical formula and likely disappointment. And in truth, apart from his own meticulous writing and editorial capacities, he was typically content for the ‘workshop’ or other clever people to dot the ‘I’s’ and cross the ‘T’s’, once there had been some dynamic established and sense of purposive assembly.

## An independent – and interdependent – socialism

The politics of his final expulsion from the Labour Party highlight a basic, lifelong characteristic, at least once the early and natural Communist Party period was exhausted. Key aspects of his ceaseless projects and initiatives were determined by the inadequacies of the Labour Party and the conventional structuring of the labour movement, that rare and largely unified political animal which somehow achieved, perhaps with ruling class help, a single central organisation for its unions and local government power, and an electoral position never seriously challenged on the Left. Ken’s politics lay *with* the labour movement, not with factions. With socialist independence, outside but not negative, supplementing and unlocking trapped forces.

It resonated with a particular sort of political syndicalism in some parts of the UK unions, and a strong independent campaigning tradition in what is now called civil society. Such was CND, such were earlier unemployed

workers' movements and, more recently, the hugely successful Stop the War movement. Ken was deep into what might be called 'movementism' as a short-hand. His initiatives for a European Recovery Programme and full employment conventions, and the pensioners' and disabled people's parliaments in the European Parliament, were based on an open, rallying, representational and ancient model of '*parlements*'. The IWC was an open workshop movement. The early T&G history was tracing mobilisation and mass organisational formation.

These base level models of politics and its processes were not reducible to single issues, nor limited campaigns as such; nor were they, in my view, simply a matter of hard political experience about the inadequacies of the formal labour movement and the need to work independently.

So I would see Ken musing less about whether the post-defeat Labour Party could directly recover itself or be actively transformed, processes that do not seem at all credible or likely. His concern, I think, would have been more about how the cumulative independences from New Labour seen massively in the anti-Iraq War protests and in the disaffiliation of some key unions from Labour might develop and coalesce. And, cumulatively, about whether there might be a window for an independent socialist party formation in Britain – and, possibly residually, in England if Scots nationalism succeeded and coalition politics became the UK/Britain default. On the other hand, where a New Labour successor might grow – as an inside affiliate of a feebly recovering Labour Party or from outside — would be a central question. It would not be idle speculation: many, many tens of thousands of activists and committed people are denied a meaningful party.

What is different now is that independence and exclusion – by choice or force – from a Labour Party with only a feint heritage of inner party democracy surely mandates as terms of re-entry the re-institution of democracy as well as the restoration and development of socialist policy. That is a change of some weight compared to the days of 'policy capture' by conference and the rank and file asserting its primary authority over the Party and MPs and, indeed, Cabinets. Sadly, there is little sign of any understanding of this dimension of the heritage of a socialist labour movement as a precondition for mass party revival, so there is, to cite a Coates' favourite, 'much work to be done'.