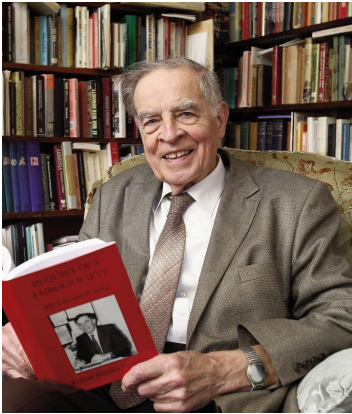


Stan Newens MP and MEP

Regan Scott



Stan Newens died in March 2021, in his 92nd year. For many years, he reviewed diverse books for The Spokesman. He will be much missed. Regan Scott recalls the MEP for London Central, whose last review is on page 133.

As a long serving Member of the European Parliament for London Central Constituency, having twice been elected to Westminster as MP for two different Essex constituencies, Stan Newens was known as a dogged socialist campaigner. He was a principled socialist politician, not afraid to face up to the electoral consequences of his sometimes unpopular principles. He faced opposition in a disarmingly quiet and reasoned way, but doggedly within the constitutional processes of the Labour Party. This ran him into problems, losing his first parliamentary seat of Epping, then coming back to Westminster for Harlow. There were attempts to get Stan deselected, and he was stigmatised by career(ist) politicians and the British political establishment as a predictable malcontent and permanent backbencher.

That's not an accurate storyline. Stan refused office under the Wilson/Callaghan Governments, and when he was defeated by Thatcherite 'Essex man' voters in Harlow in 1983, then Labour Leader Michael Foot offered him elevation to the House of Lords, where he might have contributed usefully. Like many rebels and victims of political misfortune with a principled backbone, Stan turned that down and came back into electoral politics by winning a seat in the European Parliament where, with numerous other Labour rebels and Tribunites, the subsequently influential British Labour Group emerged.

Aside from my occasional local Hampstead Labour Party contacts with Stan as an assiduous MEP, impossibly covering a dozen or so Westminster constituencies, I got to know him through European work of the Transport & General Workers' Union,

for which I had become responsible. As secretary of its Labour MEPs group (some 18 MEPs of around 60), Stan worked closely with my friend Ken Coates, of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and Workers' Control repute.

Both Ken and Stan had been conscientious objectors to national service, doing their time as coal miners, Stan in North Staffordshire. He was by profession a history teacher and, according to *The Guardian*, a Marxist – but what socialist wasn't, in one way or another, unless they were Labour social democrats. His teaching notes would be an interesting archival resource.

The politics of the European Parliamentary Labour Party, as it became, deserve more of an airing: they reflected domestic Labour politics, of course, but kept up traditional Labour policy when it was waning at home. Stan reflected that pattern, but he was independent minded. When post-Wilson Labour politics really rifted, he was not enamoured of the Benn challenge for Deputy Leadership, though eventually voting for him. More recently, he was a Corbyn supporter – a necessary and honourable political stance.

The EPLP took the initiative, as I remember, to resist and protest Tony Blair's seminal attack on the Labour Party's foundational Clause 4, which set out the socialist principle of common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. With Ken Coates, Stan's initiative resulted in a *Guardian* advert defending Clause 4. I recall suggesting they might draft a new 'Clause 4-and-a-half' – modernising but not quitting the principle. Blair was reportedly livid, doing a *démarche* to Brussels to read the riot act. Publicised in advance, my MEP friends reported a polite, tea-party reception, no hard words exchanged. So much Blairism was stage-managed for the media: that was how the iconic leadership was produced. Stan had stood unsuccessfully against Glyn Ford for leadership of the European Parliamentary Labour Party.

Stan helped Ken Coates in his work as chairman of the European Parliament's Human Rights Committee. As a long-serving MEP, he reflected the major shift in the Labour Movement's European politics. In the EPLP, there were some outright anti-Europeans, but most saw the necessity and potential of the European dimension for extending British Labour Movement ideas and influence. There was routine co-operation with Greens and the Communists and United Left Group (GUE) and, occasionally, with honourable Christian Democrats. This was a welcome lesson in fluid, issue-led political alliances, compared to the Westminster two party, loyal opposition model.

Brexit politics are unavoidable. Like many in the Labour Movement, I think Stan would have been part of the 'No' campaign in the original UK European referendum in 1975, fronted within Labour ranks by an amalgam of left socialists and right wing Commonwealthers. Then, over years of atrophy of general socialist principles in the Labour Party, attitudes about Europe shifted from seeing its trajectory as a capitalist common market to a broader and necessary political alignment in an increasingly hostile, overwhelmingly capitalist and authoritarian world. It became a political necessity, but also an opportunity. Stan was, I sense, in line with that policy shift, which was never starry eyed or deferential to establishment politics. It came through in the TUC and Labour Party in the Kinnock policy review process, where I co-drafted the new policy clause opening Labour's door to Europe (as T&G representative).

Already, there were some good things going on through that European door. Stan was involved in them. He was always there: around the European Nuclear Disarmament movement, organised by Ken Coates before he became an MEP; and then in the European Full Employment campaign, driven by Coates as chairman of the Parliament's Employment Committee, with trade union support, as well as that of Jacques Delors and Stuart Holland. This campaign resisted backing down from Keynesian full employment policy in the European Treaties to assist a monetarist launch of the Euro.

Stan's memoir, *In Quest of a Fairer Society*, provides an historically sharp contrast to the Thatcherite mainstream story of Essex man. Stan can be seen as an expression of the other, alternative, true Essex man and woman. Essex had socialist strongholds: the housing tenants' movement in the new estates decanted from London bombing, the 'Not Epping Likely' campaign to stop developers encroaching on Epping Forest, the stalwarts who unionised Ford at Dagenham in the 1930s, the strong CND branches, the *Daily Worker* sellers and campaign leafleters outside the tube stations out there on the end of the London Underground line.