

Remembering Tony Benn, 1925–2014

I. Growing up with a Giant by **Susie Orbach**

Tony Benn's political endeavours were stand-out moments from my adolescence. In a never-been-done-before action, in a country that felt asleep with 1950s complacency, Tony Benn was resigning his peerage and contesting his seat in parliament. Here was the older generation opposing the status quo from the position of privilege. Along with Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Vanessa Redgrave, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Joe Slovo, Ruth First, he peopled my imagination in the 1960s; the critical decade in which the democratic process was exposed for its appalling injustices. He was a crucial part of waking up my generation all over the world, and I went to hear him speak when ever I could.

Tony Benn challenged class in its deepest sense. His desire to dismantle social inequality has been a vibrant part of the peculiarly English fetish. Class is, of course, alive and well in Britain. The establishment of an International Super Rich in the 21st century was something that Tony highlighted. Meanwhile the demonization of the working class in Britain, who have been recast as either the hard working family or the feckless, has instituted class as something shameful rather than a consequence of capitalism in later modernity. His work, our work, remains undone.

What has so inspired me about Tony Benn was his dedication, his commitment, his radicalism and his authenticity. To be a political activist, a chronicler, a loving father and a radical who just kept on getting more so as he aged is no trivial accomplishment. We've become so accustomed to stories of lefties who turn right, or public figures with difficult relationships at home. Not so Tony Benn.

His exemplary example was to be his own man. He never came across as belligerent, but as passionate and thoughtful, while conveying a sense of the rightness of his opinion. Perhaps he got this confidence from his own privileged background, but it wasn't a paternalistic confidence. It was a confidence that meant he would listen, debate, engage and orate in ways that have inspired so many of us.

Thank you, Tony Benn. I never knew you personally, but it has been so important to have your politics and your actions in my mind.

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II. Daring to Stand Alone, Daring to Stand Together: A Personal–Political Appreciation of Tony Benn (1925–2014) by **Keith Tudor**

In 2009 I emigrated/immigrated to Aotearoa New Zealand, since which time I have been fully immersed in settling in my new homeland: working, making new friends, and learning about politics from a different perspective. Whilst I keep up with world news, I do not specifically check the news in the UK on a regular basis, and so it was a few days after the 14th March this year that I heard the news of Tony Benn's death. When I did, my response was one of genuine sadness and a profound sense of loss, heightened by the distance especially from old comrades in the UK.

As a political activist, especially active in the 1980s, I marched on many demonstrations and saw Tony Benn speak on a number of occasions. Whilst I didn't always agree with his politics, I was always in awe of his oratory, and appreciative of his passion, a passion which seemed to increase with age. For those of us of a certain era who are also ageing and also still passionate about politics, he was inspirational, and the more so when, in 2001, he left the UK Parliament; as he put it: 'I was giving up Parliament to spend more time on politics', a phrase he attributed to his wife, Caroline, who predeceased him by nearly 15 years. His engagement with grass-roots politics echoed T.S. Eliot's (1927) sentiment that: 'Politics has become too serious a matter to be left to politicians!' (p. 386)

I wanted to write something about Tony Benn for this journal as he was a humanist, not in a psychological sense, but in a social and a Christian sense, a background I have in common with him as his family were Congregationalist, and mine Unitarian. I think he would have been somewhat amused by being the subject of appreciations which are appearing in a journal of psychology as I suspect he was somewhat cautious about the individualistic nature of psychology and of (psycho)analysis. I remember hearing him on the radio (in 1995) 'In the Psychiatrist's Chair', with Dr Anthony Clare, a programme, the recording of which is available on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImLTlppBLDk>), and which provided a fascinating insight into Benn's background and personality, as well as his ability to keep Clare at arm's length, hardly allowing him to offer any insight.

Being a Daniel

The title of this appreciation is taken from one of his books *Dare to be a Daniel* (Benn, 2004), a phrase which, in turn, was taken from a

Salvation Army hymn, which his father used to recite, the second verse of which runs thus:

Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known.

This repeated injunction clearly represented core values of his family of origin: consistency and courage in the face of adversity. In the book he described a picture of Daniel in the lions' den which he had hung in his office – as he put it, 'to remind me of those qualities that are most important in public life' (p. 11).

As much as Benn was willing and able to stand alone, he was hugely and consistently committed to collective action and solidarity, and hence I also wanted to acknowledge the fact that he stood for standing together, perhaps an echo of the hymn's repeated reference to 'Daniel's band'. In psychological terms, this reflects the trend to homonomy as well as the trend to autonomy (Angyal, 1941), a trend which challenges the somewhat individualist and individualizing view of the human being in mainstream Western psychology, and a critique of which I am sure Benn would have approved of.

The British Labour Party

Although he was a staunch supporter of the Labour Party, a member of the Labour governments of 1964–70 as Postmaster General and Minister of Technology, and 1974–9 as Secretary of State for Industry and later for Energy, and, indeed, in 1981, was a candidate for Deputy Leader of the Party, he was more than willing to offer a critique of the party, and especially of its centralized nature. In his 1976 speech to the Labour Party Conference he said: 'We are paying a heavy price for 20 years in which, as a party, we have played down our criticism of capitalism and soft-pedalled our advocacy of socialism.'

He and the socialist folk singer, Roy Bailey, did a series of evenings under the title *Writings on the Wall* (Benn, 1984). I attended one in Sheffield, during the interval of which I had the opportunity to ask him: 'As a socialist, how come you have so much faith in the Labour Party?' He responded immediately: 'Well, it's just like the Church of England; there are some good Christians in the Church of England; and there are some good socialists in the Labour Party!'. Whilst I disagreed – and still disagree – on this particular question of faith, I can nevertheless appreciate his lifelong commitment to trying to reform this particular reformist institution.

Parliament

In addition to being a good politician, Benn was a great parliamentarian. He was a fierce proponent and defender of the authority of the House of Commons, and famously gave up his inherited peerage in order to sit in the House of Commons, saying

at a press conference (in 1960) that: 'I am not a reluctant peer but [rather] a persistent commoner'. As a republican, he waged a long battle with the authorities in the Houses of Parliament which had designated the period in British history, 1649–60, The Commonwealth or The Commonwealth of England, as 'the Interregnum', which is not only an anachronistic term for this period, but also a monarchist one.

Christian Humanism

As readers of *Self & Society* will be aware, there are many forms of humanism. Benn's was a Christian humanism which embraces the moral teachings of the Bible, and cherishes the rituals of the Church, but does not subscribe to the (Apostles') Creed. Importantly, for Benn and other Christian humanists and Christian socialists, such morality is, as he himself put it, 'best realised in collective political and social action' (Benn, 2004: 147). In an interview in 2005, he acknowledged that he was 'brought up' on the Bible, the central story of which was the conflict between the kings who had power, and the prophets who preached righteousness. Benn was definitely on the side of the prophets – and of the people: the priesthood of *all* believers.

A Mighty Tree

In Aotearoa New Zealand when a public person dies, it is often likened to the falling of a great tree: 'Ka hinga te tōtara o te wao nui a Tāne | The falling of the tōtara tree in the great forest of Tāne'. Tony Benn was indeed a great tree, though perhaps more of an oak than a tōtara! Of course, when a tree falls, it returns to the earth, providing the nutrients for the next generation, and leaving a gap into which others can grow. Tony Benn has certainly left a gap, including a gap on the political Left, but his greatest legacy is the manner of the man: to have demonstrated that we can – and must – have the courage of our convictions, to be Daniels and to be willing to band together. *Kia kahal!* (Be Strong). *Ka whawhai tonu matou – Struggle without end.* ⑤

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