

Tony Benn's Lessons for the Left

Veteran socialist MP Tony Benn passed away eight years ago today. From democratising the economy to campaigning for peace, the causes he fought for are as relevant as ever.



British politician, writer, and diarist Tony Benn (1925-2014), Minister of Technology, photographed on 6 October 1969. (Evening Standard / Hulton Archive / Getty Images)

Tony Benn, who died eight years ago today, was a political giant. As well as a wonderful socialist MP and campaigner, he was a leading public educator who, through his books, speeches, and interventions, shaped what socialism in Britain is perhaps more than any other figure in the past fifty years.

Benn's socialism reflected the wave of political gains by the working classes and the huge struggles that took place in the decades after the Second World War—including the waves of decolonisation, the creation of the welfare state, campaigns against the Vietnam War and other wars, the struggles for

civil rights by the black population in the United States and the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, and a long period of rising workers' militancy including the [Upper Clyde Shipbuilders 'work-in'](#) and the historic miners' strike of 1984/5.

As a result, Benn's socialism was broad-ranging, rightly linking economic struggles with important social struggles and the need to see socialism as an internationalist movement through his work for global justice and peace.

Benn had a relentless focus on returning wealth and power to ordinary people rather than delivering it to the wealthy elites, as our current system does. In many ways, Tony Benn and Bennism were forerunners of what became known as Corbynism to a new generation of socialist activists. Without doubt, his key ideas continue to offer significant insights into the solutions needed to resolve the deep crises faced by our communities today—in the economy, the climate, and inequality.

To note their enduring relevance, I recently launched a teaching pack looking at three key pillars of Bennism: the need for a much more democratic society, a programme for an economy that serves the many, not the few, and the struggle for global justice. Here, I look briefly at each.

For a People's Democracy

Beyond passionately campaigning for a more democratic Labour Party, a key focus for Tony Benn was the wider limitations of democracy in Britain. As he once put it, 'If the British people were ever to ask themselves what power they truly enjoyed under our political system, they would be amazed to discover how little it is.'

He believed not only that formal democratic rights are too restricted, but that democracy did not apply to important areas such as the workplace, where people spend a huge part of their lives. He labelled ours 'a very imperfect democracy' that 'has no industrial elements' and 'no democracy in the media or business'.

Benn focused on addressing this lack of democracy, believing it key to challenging the class power at the heart of British society often concealed by our formal democratic and state institutions.

In June 1991, Benn proposed the [Commonwealth of Britain Bill](#), which sought to democratise Britain. This Commonwealth would have its own constitution with a 'Charter of Rights' that enshrined social, economic, and political rights, including free healthcare, education, and childcare, free transport, and a right to culture, as well as establishing an elected Head of State and an elected House of the People in place of the House of Lords.

This much wider definition of democracy and of the rights we should have in our society is even more important today when decades of neoliberalism have trampled on many of the gains made in the post-World War II period.

Tony Benn, however, did not believe politics and democracy were just about Parliament. He always saw the people's role in protest, direct action, strikes, and demonstrations as a key part of political activity. He believed that 'change from below, the formulation of demands from the populace to end unacceptable injustice, supported by direct action, has played a far larger part in shaping British democracy than most constitutional lawyers, political commentators, historians or statesmen have ever cared to admit.'

Of course, the establishment, as well as Benn, has always understood this. That's why, at this time of deep crisis and growing unpopularity its policies, the government is [attacking](#) the right to protest.

Alternative Economic Strategy

Another key focus for Benn was breaking the economic power that capital held over the lives of people. Benn constantly pushed for an alternative economic model—one that didn't just serve the interests of the majority of people, but was run by them, too.

His ideas on the economy began to radicalise in the aftermath of Labour's 1970 general election defeat, as the limitations of the post-war mixed economy started to be felt. Benn's alternative was based on 'a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families'—a commitment later adopted by the party programme, and then readopted under Jeremy Corbyn.

One area of work in which he was involved in the hopes of achieving this shift was the Alternative Economic Strategy, or AES—a socialist response to the economic crisis of the 1970s. The AES set out plans to expand public control of the economy by purchasing twenty-five of the biggest manufacturing companies from various sections of the economy. It included public ownership of major financial institutions to give democratic control over the investment policies of pension funds and other sources of industrial finance.

These newly nationalised sectors would be organised via industrial democracy. Additionally, the AES would have imposed planning agreements on a further 100 companies, so that big firms pursued production, employment, and investment policies that fitted society's needs.

Many of these ideas have striking echoes today, especially in the grassroots discussions of a socialist Green New Deal necessary to prevent catastrophic climate change—which cannot be achieved within a model that puts the pursuit of profit above all other interests.

For Peace and Global Justice

Tony Benn was also a powerful voice for global justice and against war and militarism, standing in the traditions of Labour's first Leader, Keir Hardie, who it is often forgotten boldly opposed the First World War.

Tony Benn's internationalism was not an 'add on' to his politics, but a fundamental part of his entire political, economic, and moral framework, and shaped by his own experiences in the Second World War.

His activism in this area is breathtaking. He was Secretary of the Movement for Colonial Freedom, founded in 1954 when many African countries were still British colonies. He was the first MP to table a motion against Apartheid in South Africa. He was a prominent supporter of justice for Palestine and called for an end to all arms sales to Israel. He was a leading member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament from its formation, and later, he was President of the Stop the War Coalition. Benn famously spoke on the largest march in British history—in 2003, against the Iraq War.

Benn advocated for Britain to adopt an independent foreign policy—meaning one not based on being the junior partner to the USA—and one that played a more constructive role in the development of international cooperation, for peace, conflict resolution, and human rights.

To this end, he emphasised the vital role of the international labour and socialist movements in taking the initiative to build such a new international order, based on real cooperation and development in the interests of the whole of humanity. As he remarked in the aftermath of the Iraq War, 'If we can find the money to kill people, we can find the money to help people.'

As socialists, we remember Tony Benn today, and not just out of a passionate interest in our

movement's history. We remember him and his analysis of our democracy, our economy, and our role in the world because they can offer real guidance for practical socialist solutions to the injustices, inequalities, and crises we now face. Tony Benn remains a great teacher.