Tony Benn, pictured in January 2012 at the US Embassy in London, on a Stop the War demonstration against an attack on Iran.
Tony Benn was a friend to the Haldane Society, as he was to many socialist groups. He spoke most recently at our AGM in 2006, and received copies of Socialist Lawyer. It was telling that Benn’s political opponents from the 1980s could not bring themselves to speak well of him, even after his death. Denis Healey, who beat Benn by 0.8 per cent of the vote in 1981 to win the deputy leadership of the Labour Party, said Benn had been ‘enormously damaging’. Shirley Williams and Polly Toynbee, founders of the SDP which became part of today’s Liberal Democrat Party, asserted that he was out of touch and responsible for the 18 years of Tory Government between 1979 and 1997. Ed Miliband, Margaret Beckett and others distanced themselves from Benn’s politics, while paying tribute to his powers of oratory and his political principles. Surprisingly, tributes to Bob Crow even from establishment figures were warmer than those paid to Benn; yet Crow died just as the RMT was taking industrial action, and represented modern militant trade unionism.

Benn, who hated the idea that he had become a national treasure, would not have been surprised by old enemies re-fighting old battles. The venom directed at him reflected how significant the battle for control of the Labour Party in the late 1970s and early 1980s had been; and just how much the establishment breathed a sigh of relief when Bennism was beaten back. The stakes were high.

Bennism was not just Tony Benn. In 1974, the miners had brought down the Conservative Government, led by Edward Heath, and Labour was elected under Harold Wilson. The Conservatives, terrified of industrial militancy, regrouped, elected Margaret Thatcher as leader and started to reject the post-war Keynesian consensus. The Labour Government struggled to cope with inflation and a run on the pound, and turned to the International Monetary Fund who imposed what we would now recognise as neo-liberal structural conditions as terms of its loan. The Labour Government brought in wage restraint and unemployment rose. Once Thatcher had been elected in 1979, the Labour Party had to decide whether its economic policy would be soft-Thatcherism, or full-scale radical socialism, including public ownership of the banks and other key industries, industrial democracy and workers’ control, full employment and redistribution of wealth. The other key area of dispute was nuclear weapons: Healey and the right of the Labour Party were committed to retaining Britain’s nuclear arms and membership of Nato, in other words to a foreign policy aligned to the interests of the United States of America. The left, led by Benn, called for unilateral nuclear disarmament, for Britain to leave Nato and to purs...
found the SDP and destabilise Labour. Others stayed in, precisely in order to vote for Healey, and subsequently joined the SDP. Most of the parliamentary Labour Party leadership went all out to undermine Benn. For Labour Party and trade union members, however, many of whom were also CND members demonstrating against cruise missiles and who were also gearing up to fight public spending cuts, Benn’s message resonated. ‘Benn for Deputy’ badges were worn at every Labour Party meeting. Despite falling ill halfway through the summer, he spoke over and over again at demonstrations, rallies, and party meetings. He lost the deputy leadership on the second ballot as a result of a handful of Tribune Group MPs abstaining. One of those abstainers was Neil Kinnock.

Healey’s victory opened the door for the right to attack policies voted through by the left. The 1983 election might have been different had senior Labour Party figures spent a great deal of energy attacking the party’s own manifesto. Kinnock, elected Leader in 1983 after the general election, steered the party away from unilateral nuclear disarmament (which he had been personally committed to just a few years earlier), and failed to support the miners wholeheartedly. Kinnock in turn led to Blair and New Labour claiming, from Thatcher’s own words, that there was no alternative to neo-liberalism. In so far as Labour in the 1980s was ‘unelectable’ (New Labour’s favourite mantra), it was due to the right turning on the party’s own policies, rather than portraying a united message. In local elections, the Labour Party frequently won. Ken Livingstone’s GLC, representing the same ‘loony left’ politics as Benn, was popular with Londoners. The GLC and Labour Councils were viciously attacked for pioneering equality politics, but it was their work that helped to change attitudes, particularly towards homophobia.

Even his detractors admit that Benn had oratorical skill and personal charm. Many Socialist Lawyer readers will have fond memories of his accounts of English radical history (the Levellers, the Chartists, the suffragettes), of his encounters with Gandhi, Ramsey MacDonald (‘he patted me on the head and gave me a chocolate biscuit’) and of the socialist train.

I treasure his personal solidarity. In 1995, when Blair blocked me from standing as Labour’s parliamentary candidate in Leeds North-East after I had been democratically selected by the local Labour Party, I briefly became the focus of media attention. By the time of Labour Party Conference, all the real decisions had been taken, the political fight was over, but Leeds North-East was given the chance to protest to Conference. Afterwards, I, with comrades from Leeds North-East, Islington Labour Party, and elsewhere, gave a short statement to the press. I answered a few questions and thought that was it. But they would not let me go. We were surrounded and I have a memory of various journalists and photographers shouting, indeed howling, at me. Even experienced MPs including Jeremy Corbyn and Alan Simpson were taken aback. None of us knew what to do. Then Tony Benn pushed his way through the crowd, stood right in front of me, blocking the press’s view of me, and started to make jokes at the expense of the press. They were laughing and embarrassed and gradually let us go. Three years later, I was elected by Labour Party members onto the National Executive Committee, very much against the wishes of Blair. When the result was announced, Benn was one of the first people I wanted to tell. I found him, characteristically outside the Conference centre, addressing a demonstration. He had tears in his eyes as he hugged me, and filmed me on a small camera. Benn loved gadgets.

Too many people have been quick to say that they mourn his passing, but they were not Bennites. I have always been a Bennite and I mourn Benn’s passing precisely because I agreed with him.

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“We are not just here to manage capitalism but to change society and to define its finer values.”