

agency vote. So if my vote is on the losing side at either ward or constituency level, I might just as well not have voted at all as far as the final count is concerned, for even if I had voted for the eventual winner, my vote would not have been a factor in the count. (There are even more bizarre permutations which I leave you to work out for yourself. Such is delegatory democracy in the Labour Party.)

Still, I want to cast my vote responsibly, because I might be on the winning side and there is, after all, an alternative narrative, though much less likely, in which my vote tips the balance in the ward, the ward tips the balance in the constituency, and the constituency tips the balance in an otherwise hung election.

### Outraged insistence

So how will I vote? Well, I'm still thinking about it. Most of all, at the moment, I'm annoyed by the way the election is being conducted - by the outraged insistence of the leadership that it's divisive and irrelevant (procedural alterations have been made to ensure it won't be so easy next time), and by the polarisation which grips the Labour Party the moment anything can be categorised as a battle between right and left.

So at a Tony Benn meeting, there is a mass turn-out of the hard left and hardly anyone else, and at a John Prescott meeting (more of that, perhaps, in the next issue), there is a comparable, if smaller, turn-out of the soft left, almost the only common factor, apart from me, being a local councillor who, for reasons I entirely support (if I interpret them correctly), is keeping his powder dry with both factions.

But I am being forced to choose, not in the spirit of comradely debate appropriate to a socialist party - where it is surely not inconceivable to challenge the leadership if you are unhappy with it, or, alternatively, surely not an act of treachery to search with some desperation for a formula to stem a seemingly unstoppable tide of reaction - but to choose in a spirit of parti pris, of preconceived opinion, where whichever way you vote there will be a whiff of treachery.

I admire Tony Benn and Eric Heffer, and I'm certainly not abandoning my admiration because the leadership denounces them. They say a lot of things straight which the present leadership seems incapable of saying without nervous spasms in case it offends the "moderate" voter. Yes, of course I respond to the old socialist fundamentals, the basic "sod the Tories, up the workers" I learned at my father's knee. But I also know that putting it into practice is infinitely more complicated than the honest emotions which inspire it. If the answers to capitalism were so simple, why did Karl Marx spend a lifetime completing only a fraction of his projected analysis of it, and why did he change his mind so often about the best way of destroying it?

What I resent most of all is being forced to choose in this stark, oversimplified way between the need to preserve fundamental principles and the need to respond to changing circumstances, two aspects of policy which should not be in opposition but complementary - in a state of

creative, not destructive, tension. Disastrously, they have been precipitated out as separate, antagonistic components, whereas in reality neither can survive without the other. And, in reality, despite the distortions of the campaign, neither side would deny this. The tragedy is that arguments of principle have been hijacked by the left and arguments of pragmatism have been hijacked by the right, and on these mutilated foundations intractable positions have been adopted.

Tony Benn worries me (so does Neil Kinnock, but that's a story for another day). Socialism is not dead, but in Benn's hands some aspects of it show suspicious signs of rigor mortis. Attitudes and analyses have become locked into an old Soviet-style time warp, where even with the passing of years we are not allowed to admit we might have been wrong.

Yet again, for example, the miners' and Wapping printworkers' disputes are presented as stainlessly heroic and unproblematic. They were not. Surely even the most committed can now admit that a good case against unscrupulous employers, state repression and police violence was fatally weakened not so much by lack of support from the Labour leadership and lack of solidarity by other unions (the Benn thesis), but most of all by rank bad tactics and stupidity. In the print trade, indefensible overstaffing, restrictive practices and refusal to countenance new technology; in the coal dispute, the NUM's attempt to bully the Notts. miners into joining the strike: both of these were subject to the usual media misrepresentations, but they were near enough the truth to damage public support and weaken the labour movement's response. I wish Tony Benn could begin to recognise this, for, as the saying goes, those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Let's finish where we started, in the Rainbow Room, and with another analogy. Almost the last time I was in the Rainbow Room was to see Annetta Hoffnung give a show based on the work of her late husband, the sublime, hilarious Gerard. Touching, you might think, but curious and faintly morbid for a widow to be touring the lecture halls of the country perpetuating the memory of her dead husband. But not so different, if you think about it, from Tony Benn footslogging round the constituencies lighting candles for his own version of left-wing socialism. And, like an evening with Mrs Hoffnung, an evening with citizen Benn is surprisingly cheerful. For two hours, you can quite happily listen to the mermaids singing. But when it's all over, it hasn't brought the dead back to life. Mrs Hoffnung knew this - but does Tony Benn?

### QUOTATION

"IN THE 1980s the left has appeared far less interested in economics than in peace and civil liberties. That is largely because fewer of its grass-roots activists are based in the (shrinking) trade unions, and more in groups standing for women, greens, blacks, gays and peace. For that rainbow coalition, issues like unilateral nuclear disarmament, gay rights and curbing the power of the police are far more exciting than economic management. That, even more than their views, makes these new socialists look a force of dissent rather than of government." (*The Economist*, 2.7.88)

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## Very British moderation

ALMOST AS INTERESTING AS *A Very British Coup* was the reaction of the press, obsessed as it was by whether or not the plot (in both senses) was true to life. The most withering scorn was reserved for the very idea that a fundamentalist Labour Party could win a landslide victory in the first place, but almost as risible for some commentators was the assumption that, if such a government were elected, reactionaries in the civil service, security services and elsewhere (including the Labour Party) would conspire to overthrow it.

Playing the same game for a moment, I would have thought that events since Chris Mullin wrote his original thriller in 1981 have thrown doubt on the former but ominously reinforced the latter.

But is that the point? This wasn't a documentary but a "What if ...?", and it seems entirely plausible that if that sort of government were elected, then those sorts of counter measure would be taken against it. In fact, one reason (and I'm not saying the only reason) why a left-wing government has never been elected in this country is that everyone, including senior members of the Labour Party, knows this already and modifies policy accordingly.

### Measures would be taken

Indeed, what everyone also knows is that reactionary forces wouldn't wait until after an election. Measures would be taken during the campaign - and before it even started. Would be, have been and are being. There is a long history of such activity, from the Zinoviev letter over sixty years ago to, more recently, Heseltine's smearing of CND, based on illegal phone-taps, and the tapping and leaking of Neil Kinnock's phone-calls to Malcolm Turnbull, Peter Wright's counsel in the Australian *Spycatcher* hearings.

Paradoxically, the fear that it would never be allowed means that it need never be put to the test, because a straitjacket is wrapped round the entire politics of the left. I suspect that Neil Kinnock and even those current right-wing bogeymen, Roy Hattersley, Bryan Gould and John Smith (and perhaps even David Owen) would secretly like to behave a little like Harry Perkins - if they thought they could get away with it. Policies are modified not necessarily from a sense of conviction, but from a sense of what the electorate will take - and what the civil and military establishment will take.

I have to be careful here or I'll seem like one of those left-wing loonies who think that all the British public is waiting for is someone to put across the socialist gospel hot and strong and the inevitable result will be Harry Perkins. What I'm



trying to say is something not quite so ambitious - that within the labour movement there operates a tragic sense of constraint, partly from history, partly from pessimism, partly from pusillanimity, and that an important component of this is a perfectly realistic awareness of how bitterly the guardians of the state are opposed to anything approaching a community of power and wealth.

What idealism, what early dreams of a brave new socialist world wither in the claustrophobia of the British political system, not because they might not work, but because people are conditioned to think they couldn't even be tried. In spelling out this fear, *A Very British Coup* is almost painfully "true to life", and perhaps that's why reaction in some quarters has been so edgy, for the play is saying that what "moderation" and "the new realism" really amount to is not common sense and truth to human nature, as they are usually presented, but the annihilation of hope for the best, of what E.P. Thompson called "the politics of desire".

## Benn: stirring up discussion

THERE WERE OVER 300 of us in the Rainbow Room on 8th July to hear Tony Benn talk about his campaign for the Labour leadership. The Rainbow Room is oddly named. It is not an iridescent celestial vision, but a workaday fifties box with monochromatic cream paintwork and pinch-waisted lampshades hanging in clusters. But we were there to hear about socialism, and perhaps somewhere in the Rainbow Room was where we would find it, or a rainbow coalition at least, from the lips of a politician who the media assure us is perpetually spinning yarns about illusory crocks of gold, a socialist fundamentalist with, moreover, not the ghost of a chance of winning this election.

But, argued Benn, victory isn't the point: "This election is about stirring up discussion." And he isn't standing from personal ambition, but because the Campaign Group asked him to.

So, not so much a campaign meeting, more a brisk trot round the issues confronting a Labour left agonising over the leadership's ever increasing accommodation with free market ideology.

### Revision notes

The mood, therefore, was not rabble-rousing or revivalist but subdued and attentive, a schoolmaster handing out revision notes, the audience there not to learn anything new, but to be reminded and reassured.

In this restrained, studious atmosphere, Benn's voice rarely rose above the polite conversational. (What most infuriates opponents on the NEC, apparently, is this imperturbable calm and court-esy.) With dimmed stage lights throwing the famously prominent eyes into shadow, he seemed an undemonstrative, entirely reasonable, rather Home Counties figure in maroon tie and sober dark blue pullover, tending to late middle-aged plumpness, hair silver, short, impeccably barbered, hands pocketed nonchalantly, stooping slightly towards the microphone, main points emphasised more in sorrow than in anger as yet more absurdities of Thatcherite Britain or Kinnockite Labour were anatomised.

If you didn't already know, you'd say an ex Tory rather than ex Labour cabinet minister, and if you wanted a look-a-like for (say) a sequel to *A Very British Coup*, you could do worse than Robert Hardy - at the bottom rather than the top of his histrionic range, but that sort of respectability. (Benn, incidentally, thinks that *A Very British Coup* offered "the most important political education of the decade".)

The audience, of course, was far from respectable. It included a fair percentage of the people in Nottingham most likely to jump on a revolution if one happened to be passing, and a good number not in the Labour Party - in fact, some were there mainly to make it quite clear that they weren't in the Labour Party.

But that wasn't until question time. If nothing else, the meeting proved that Benn is too widely respected on the left to be heckled even by the RCP. He spoke without notes and without interrupt-

ion for three quarters of an hour in those precisely articulated, slightly sibilant tones which, with the wide-eyed gaze, have contributed so much to his sinister image in certain sections of the press, pausing only for the frequent laughter and less frequent applause - less frequent because this was a deliberately unclimaxed sort of speech and because the general level of agreement was so high that only the exceptional drew applause.

So the first palpable hit didn't come until half way through - an attack on the leadership for not supporting striking miners, printworkers and seafarers. We should, said Benn, support strikers just as we support candidates at by-elections. And there was applause again as he argued that the first test of a socialist is "Whose side are you on?" Backing the nurses and the seafarers would win the party far more support than waiting for the results of the next public opinion poll.

Politically, this was all light entertainment, policy sketched in sparingly with frequent digressions, jokes and anecdotes. That it was a structure rather than a ramble appeared from time to time with a "secondly" or "thirdly", though I doubt if many of us remembered what the "firstly" had been. But we were not there to be converted or convinced or for intellectual stimulation. This was a prolonged caress, confirmation that all those gut-left priorities which the leadership seems intent on dumping, and which Mrs Thatcher has told us are dead anyway, are still alive and jumping.

Confidence was the nub of the argument. Capitalism is not as secure as it seems. Socialism is not irrelevant, and we need to keep it in good shape so that a crisis in capitalism does not produce a swing even further to the right as in pre war Germany. The 1945 General Election was won on the surge of confidence which followed the defeat of Nazism, but stories in the media now seem deliberately aimed at destroying confidence and creating anxiety so that people think they need a strong right-wing government to keep things under control.

### Dead before lunchtime

And we have to fight - outside Parliament more than in it. Mrs Thatcher's strength is outside Parliament: if capitalism relied on the Conservative MPs he saw day after day on the opposite benches, it would be dead before lunchtime tomorrow. But the Labour movement's strength is also outside Parliament. All our gains have been won by struggle outside Parliament. Did we think that, when the Tolpuddle Martyrs got back from Australia, Parliament said, "We really must allow trade unions to organise," or that Parliament suddenly thought one day, "Oh dear, we forgot to give the workers the vote"? These gains were won by struggle, and as soon as we stop struggling they take them away again.

The leadership campaign had already had an

effect. For the first time a Labour front bencher had been seen on a picket line when Michael Meacher joined the P & O strikers, and the NEC had finally decided not to discipline Sharon Atkin (sporadic applause - Ms Atkin does not have unanimous support in Nottingham even on the left). The Labour Party is an instrument created by the working class for social change. There is already a movement for social change in the country and once people have enough confidence to fight for it, no power on earth can stop them.

Applause was appreciative rather than ecstatic, and, after appeals for the Benn-Heffer campaign and the P & O seafarers, we settled down to an hour of comfortably emollient questions and answers. There were twenty-one in all, taken in threes, on quite reasonable grounds of getting more in, but the effect was to dissipate detailed argument and pressure for a precise answer, even to allow an evasive slide on to the next question. Occasionally, it degenerated into little more than a catechism of orthodox left theology, an echo chamber of the audience's expectations. Youth training schemes? A swindle. Northern Ireland? Get out. Black sections? In favour - "you don't have to wait for permission to organise" (applause). House of Lords? Abolition. The Education Reform Bill? A "thoroughly wicked bill".

### Scandalously neglected

Sometimes more interesting things emerged. On the monarchy, for example (a scandalously neglected topic in the Labour Party) - Benn believes that crown prerogatives, including those exercised by the Prime Minister, should be transferred to Parliament, as they have been in Sweden, and he somewhat chillingly observed that in this country a coup supported by the crown would be perfectly legal.

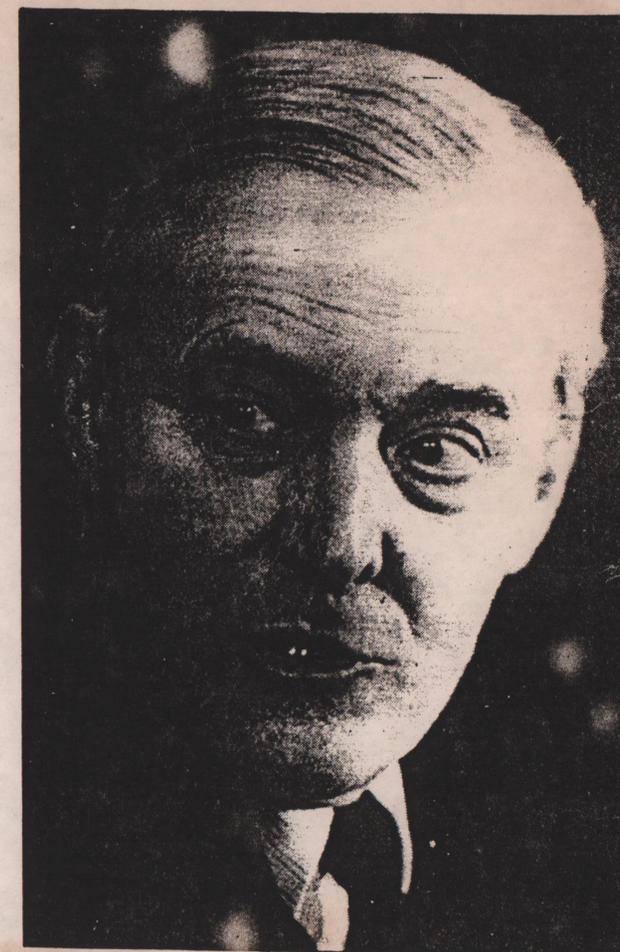
There were a few hostilities, all from outside the Labour Party, from speakers identifying themselves as belonging to Trotskyite groups - two SWP, two RCP.

First, the SWP asked why Benn wouldn't "name names" - Sam McCluskie, for example, for selling out the NUS. Benn replied that the SWP asked this question at all his meetings and his answer was always the same: he was not concerned with personalities but with issues. "And what good would it do? You don't have to denounce them. They denounce themselves."

Five questions later, it was the RCP attacking Benn's record in government and the vagueness of his policies. Just how far would the Labour Party have to move to the right before Tony Benn left it?

Here the Benn technique was seen at its most dexterous, and the three question format at its most helpful. With the utmost courtesy, he asked which party his questioner would recommend. He read all their publications in the hope of learning something, and who could say, perhaps they had some of the answers. Only time would tell. "But don't kid me your organisation is going to do it." There was laughter, and he moved on to the next question - without having to defend his policies or his record.

Two questions on and it was the SWP again, arguing that what was wanted was not struggles



but victories. There had been a failure of leadership. What was Tony Benn going to do about it? Again, Benn refused to be drawn into personalities. He wasn't going to attack the leadership, he said, because policies weren't made by the leadership, they were made by conference.

Finally it was the RCP again, but if it was meant to be a question, we never heard it, because, ill-advisedly, the questioner began to denounce the Labour Party, in a penetrating, metallic voice, claiming that people had no faith in it or its policies. "Question, question!" bellowed the audience, and, after further abortive polemics, he sat down.

In reply, Benn was at his most unctuous: "If you don't mind my saying so, and I don't mean to be insulting, quite frankly not many people have much faith in the Revolutionary Communist Party." There was laughter again, and the meeting ended soon after in the same low key which had prevailed throughout, and with Benn saying something I didn't quite catch over the scraping of chairs about "the jackboot of Thatcherism".

Now, I was at the meeting not merely to be entertained but for a serious purpose. I have a vote in these elections, though this vote is, if anything, even more meaningless than the quinquennial/quadrennial cross which is parliamentary democracy, since my single vote will be subsumed under a single vote by my ward at the constituency general management committee meeting, which will be subsumed in turn under a single constit-