
Tony Benn (3 April 1925-14 March 2014): an appreciation

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Tony Benn was a remarkable and hugely influential politician, though not, according to the way many commentators view these things, a conventionally successful one. He held only four ministerial positions, the most senior of them (Secretary of State for Industry) for just over a year: from March 1974 to June 1975. Yet it must be remembered that when his father died in 1960, he was forced to inherit the title of Viscount Stansgate, which his father had accepted in 1941, and, having immediately relinquished a title he had dreaded having to inherit, he embarked on an ultimately successful three-year constitutional struggle to remain in the House of Commons as MP for Bristol South-East. And throughout his life, and particularly after his failure, by a very narrow margin, to secure the Deputy Leadership of the Labour Party in 1981, he took on the role of teacher and communicator, which he pursued, despite the frailties of old age, until almost the very end of his life.

I first met Tony in the mid-1960s, when I joined his wife Caroline in the burgeoning campaign for comprehensive education; and in all the years I knew him as a friend and fellow Socialist, I cannot recall his saying anything in a discussion or document that he did not actually believe. And the fact that he did have strong beliefs which he was not prepared to modify for the sake of advancement made him stand out against so many of the other politicians of his era. As the journalist Gary Younge wrote in *The Guardian* the day after Tony died (March 15, 2014): 'he had the respect of all those who were desperate for some ideological authenticity, for someone for whom politics was rooted, not merely in a series of calculations about what was possible in any given moment, but in a set of principles guiding what was necessary and desirable'.

In his early life memoir, *Dare to be a Daniel*, Tony Benn explained why the Salvation Army hymn from which this line comes, had been such an important influence on his life:

Father often used to recite this hymn: 'Dare to be a Daniel, Dare to stand alone, Dare to have a purpose firm, Dare to make it known'; and these lines lodged in my mind so that, whenever the going has been rough, I have fallen back on them. The hymn has taught me the importance of consistency and courage in the face of adversity – essential for anyone who is criticised for his (**sic**) convictions. In 1983 I saw in the YMCA in Nagasaki, of all places, a picture of Daniel standing with his hands behind his back and his head bowed, surrounded by all the lions. So I photographed it and it now hangs in my office to remind me of those qualities that are the most important in public life:

Standing by a purpose true,
Heeding God's command,
Honour them, the faithful few!
All hail to Daniel's band!
Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known. (2004, p. 11)

In his various interviews with the media, and particularly over the last 15 years, Tony was anxious to stress the debt he owed to his life-long partner Caroline, whom he had married in Cincinnati in June 1949, and who died of cancer in November 2000. In an interview with Alice Thomson of the *Daily Telegraph* (February 8, 2001), he called Caroline his 'Socialist soulmate', and argued that she was the one with the mind:

She took an historical perspective on everything. She'd scribble in in-decipherable writing all over my speeches, and she'd often say: 'you're trying to make too many points'.

He accepted the view, once put forward in the *Times Educational Supplement*, that her campaign for comprehensive education had had more of an impact on Britain than anything he had achieved:

That was moving, humbling and true ... She never sought publicity; she much preferred to work collectively. She was naturally self-effacing, and that gave her strength. She didn't want public recognition, but to change the system. She influenced me enormously. All the mistakes I made were because I didn't take her advice.

Tony and Caroline were a remarkable and inspirational couple. British political life – indeed life in general – is the poorer without them.

Reference

Benn, T. (2004) *Dare to be a Daniel*. London: Hutchinson.

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