

# Benn with prophets not kings

Jon  
Lansman  
remembers  
Tony Benn

Jon Lansman is  
editor of *Left  
Futures*

For at least four decades, Tony Benn has been a leader of, and something of a hero for, much of the British left. His apotheosis was not something he cultivated, though his enemies claimed otherwise – he was ‘a Messiah figure hiding behind the mask of the common man’ according to *the Sun*, motivated by ‘a belief that he was the messiah’ said union fixer, John Golding, ‘and with his small group of disciples... he would create a heaven on earth.’

On the contrary, he was always at pains to argue that politics was about ‘policies not personalities’, a phrase he used in his spin doctor phase long before he’d acquired hero status, in a party political broadcast for Hugh Gaitskell. And he specifically downplayed the role of a leader: ‘every generation has to fight the same battles again, and again, and again. There is no destination called justice or democracy and if you find a train driven by the right man

you’ll get there.’

Since Tony’s failed bid for Labour’s deputy-leadership in 1981, we have seen a succession of autocratic and centralising leaders. Benn’s Congregationalist upbringing, he said, taught him ‘the story of the Bible was conflict between the kings who had power, and the prophets who preached righteousness.’ He was on the side of the prophets, not that of the kings and Machiavellian princes.

And to the extent that he was the Left’s leader, he voiced our aspirations rather than being our commander-in-chief. His oratory was uplifting and inspirational. And later, when we started losing, it continued to give us hope, deserving of his chosen epitaph – ‘he encouraged us’.

The basis for Tony Benn’s judgement was very different from Blair’s: “My mother once said to me that all decisions, including political decisions, are basically moral. Is it right or wrong? And when a new issue

comes up, you have to ask yourself, ‘If we do this, is it going to be right or wrong?’” And the basis of his moral judgements was essentially Christian.

He was no intellectual, his Oxford education notwithstanding. In answering the question of what moved him, Tony said “It isn’t bloody books. I hardly ever read them.” Famously, he read no Marx until Caroline put *The Communist Manifesto* in his Christmas stocking in 1985. He had, he said, “lived in the oral tradition, learning from listening and watching rather than from reading, and communicating by speaking rather than writing”. According to biographer Michael Newman, the great respect Ralph Miliband had for Tony was his energy and optimism rather than his intellect. He had been radicalised through the experience of government and would not subvert his principles in the interest of any ‘political game’. The sort of politician we need more of.

## OUR HISTORY

### OUR HISTORY 54

#### James Connolly - Socialism made easy (1909)

James Connolly was an Irish republican socialist. Connolly was born in Edinburgh – his father was a manure carrier for the Edinburgh Corporation. Enlisting in the army at the age of 14, he left military service in 1889 and mentored by the socialist poet, John Leslie, he joined the Social Democratic Federation becoming Scottish correspondent of Justice. In Scotland the SDF and Socialist League united as the Scottish Socialist Federation. In 1894, Connolly became secretary of the Edinburgh branch of the newly founded ILP. In 1896, Connolly was appointed paid organiser of the Dublin socialist club and established the Irish Socialist Republican Party, combining Irish nationalism with socialism. Connolly lived in America between 1902 and 1910, where he was active in De Leon’s Socialist Labour Party and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) as well as establishing an Irish Socialist Federation among Irish-American workers. *Socialism Made Easy* was originally published in Chicago in 1908, to be followed in 1910 by *Labour in Irish History*, a Marxist analysis of Irish history. Returning to Ireland in 1910, Connolly resumed his previous role as leader of the Irish republican socialists – he took over from James Larkin as secretary of the Irish TGWU, when Larkin went to America. In 1912 he founded the Irish Labour Party. When the Ulster protes-

tants formed a Volunteer Army to resist the implementation of the 1912 Home Rule Act, Connolly formed an Irish Citizens Army. This army was to participate in the Easter rising of 1916, with Connolly to be vice president of the provisional government, with Padraic Pearce as president. The leadership of the Irish volunteers did not support the uprising and Connolly’s small band of rebels was isolated and soon defeated by the British army. Connolly was wounded in the fighting and executed on May 12 1916.

*“If you belong to the working class your duty is clear. Your union must be perfected until it embraces every one who toils in the service of your employer, or as a unit in your industry. The fact that your employers find it necessary to secure the services of any individual worker is or ought to be that individual’s highest and best title to be a member of your union. If the boss needs him you need him more. You need the open union and the closed shop if you ever mean to control the means and conditions of life. And as the champion of your class upon the political field, as the ever active propagandist of the idea of the working class, as the representative and embodiment of the social principle of the future, you need the Socialist Labour Party. The future of Labour is bound up with the harmonious development of those twin expressions of the forces of progress: the Freedom of Labour will be born of their happily consummated union.”*