

Sentinel Interview

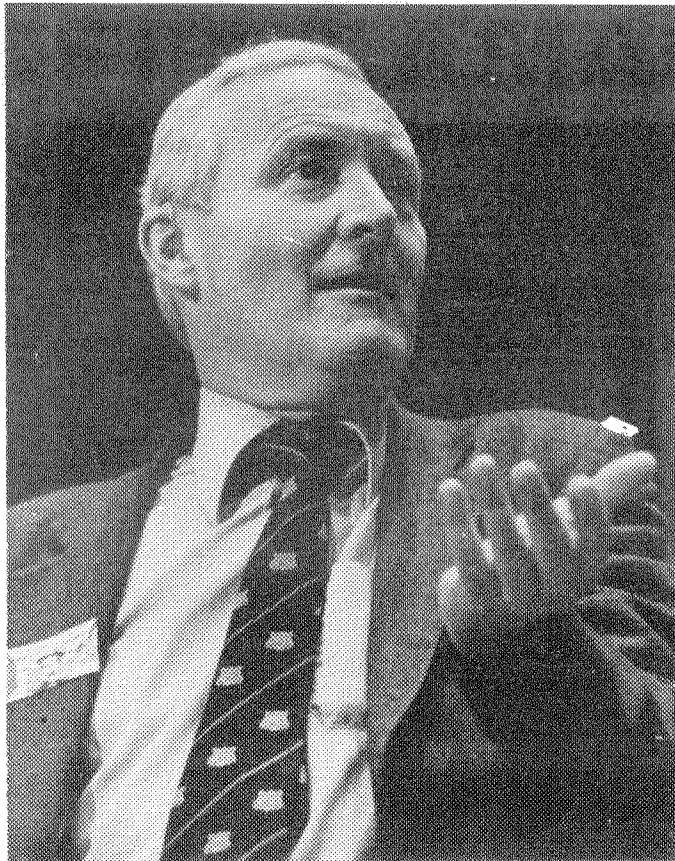
Tony Benn believes that Mrs Thatcher, her Government and the national press are distorting the issues in the miners' strike for political ends.

"There are no uneconomic pits; if you deprive a pit of investment you can reduce it to a difficult situation. You could turn your house into a slum if you didn't repair the roof, deal with the frozen pipes, paint it up. The Government are trying to present this as an economic argument, but the miners are right: we've got 1000 years of coal, it's cheaper than nuclear power (which is financed entirely by the nuclear weapons programme). We sell North Sea Oil to the Generating Board at 40 per cent above the cost of coal because we sell it at the world price."

Democracy

Why is there a dispute then? "It's not about pay" stresses Tony Benn, "it's a dispute prepared for by the government, and triggered by the government. What we are witnessing now is the destruction of democracy. I'm going far beyond the miners' strike, we're seeing local democracy either strangled by rate capping or abolished like the GLC and the metropolitan counties, we're seeing the police used in a way that is quite unacceptable and we're seeing the courts used as an instrument of government policy."

Seen in this way the miners' dispute is part of an overall strategy to change the social landscape of this country: to reduce wages and abolish the Welfare State. To do this Mrs Thatcher has to emasculate the unions and paralyse local democracy.



Many people who were born after the birth of the Welfare State (1945-50) take it for granted: some people who were around at its inception have become complacent about its growth and nourishment. Not Tony Benn. He realises that collective action and struggle have achieved all that Mrs Thatcher is trying to take away. "The power of working people has always lain in two things: one is trade union membership which allows you to bargain collectively with your employer ... about wages, or conditions, or safety, or pensions; a second source of strength is the ballot box. Working class people cannot afford to buy education for their children, health for their families, pensions for the old from their own resources, so again they combine to support political action."

"By attacking trade unions and local democracy the government is trying to extinguish opposition, and this is a very big thing, it's an attack on services, an attack on our public industries and an attack on civil liberties."

Decision

If we respond to the validity of this argument we will see that "This is not a miners' battle anymore; the choice we have to make is whether we are to be spectators of the withdrawal of our rights or participants in retaining them."

The most tangible way to do this at the moment, is to assist the miners. It is no coincidence that Mrs Thatcher has picked the mining industry as her battleground. Tony Benn believes that this is "at root, a

"...spectators of the withdrawal of our rights,"

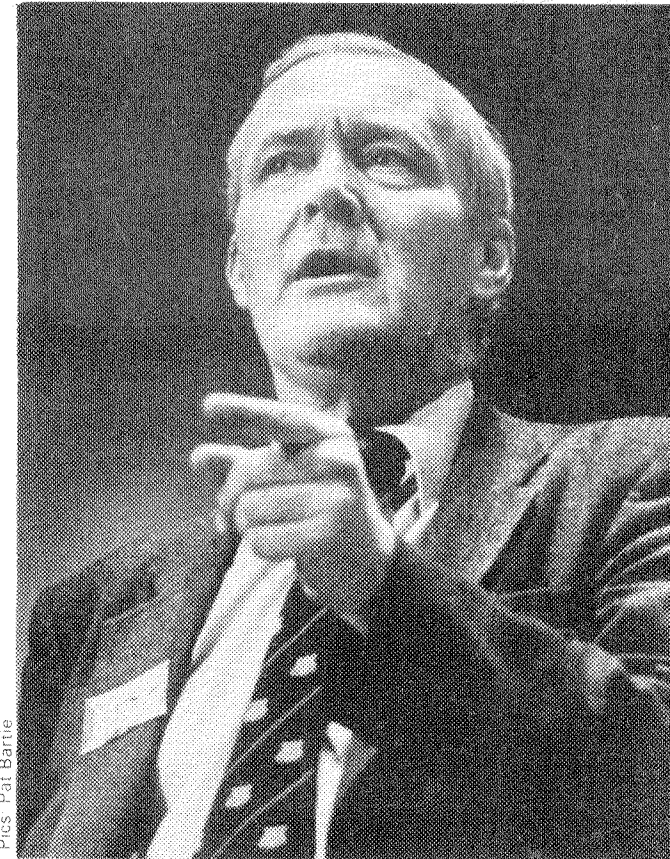
moral battle too", and indicates that "deep in the heart of mining, and the mining tradition, is the principle of collective responsibility for each other, and this is itself a threat to the rotten 'get rich quick' values that Mrs Thatcher tries to pump down our throats".

Dignity

Tony Benn, like many religious and political leaders, believes that Mrs Thatcher's monetarist policies - strong to the fore: weak to the wall - are basically devious, immoral and unchristian, and for that reason she and her government must be opposed. However, the difficulty arises in that the Conservative Government are passing laws to cripple trade unionism, undermine local democracy and sell off public institutions (an example being our excellent bus service).

"A parliament made up of two Conservative Houses can make any law they like" says Benn. But are we morally bound to obey those laws? "The question is a simple one - you are legally obliged to obey the law, but not morally obliged to obey unjust laws. The difference between legal and moral obligation lies at the root of our society. We would have no religious rights unless people had broken the law, we would have no political rights or trade union rights if we hadn't broken the law."

"Law is man made. At the Nuremberg Trials all the



Pics: Pat Bartie

"...or participants in retaining them."

possibly lose. I heard the other day that they've got a committee collecting Easter eggs for the miners' children ... I don't think Mrs Thatcher yet understands what she's up against."

And one of the reasons for her ignorance, and the ignorance of a lot of people, on both sides, is the

communication we have the better. "I'm in favour of diversity of channels including a diversity of community papers". Some of these papers Tony believes are "first rate papers, which in the end could end up as national papers; if you can have the Manchester Guardian why can't you have

TONY BENN



Interviewed this month in the *Sentinel* is Tony Benn, a Labour M.P. for 34 years and at present the Member of Parliament for Chesterfield, a mining constituency. He supports the miners' struggle, but not only in the House of Commons; he has travelled the length and breadth of the country talking to and for the miners.

He is an M.P. who has held high political office - first as Minister of Technology, and later as Secretary of State for Industry. A former peer whose political outlook was formed, not by reading books, but by struggle: struggle against the House of Lords and the legal system in order that he could take his seat in the Commons; struggle with working people at the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' work-in, at the Meriden and Kirkby co-operatives, and with the shop stewards at Lucas Aerospace.

Tony Benn is a man uniquely placed to analyse what the miners' struggle is all about and put it into its wider context. He believes that what Britain needs now is a comprehensive, peaceful and democratic revolution in order to achieve "socialism in our time".

SOCIALISM IN OUR TIME

Germans brought up for trial said 'we were just obeying orders', but the judges said that one is not allowed to do things that are wrong, even if they are the law. All our rights have been won by law breaking. Mrs Thatcher wouldn't be Prime Minister to-day if the Suffragettes hadn't broken the law, she's a product of law-breaking."

Many brave men and women have struggled over the centuries to give us the rights and the standard of living we have today. "If we allow the rights won by struggle to be taken away without struggle, then we are responsible for what happens to us."

Defence

The miners are in the vanguard of that struggle. "What miners are doing is defending all of us. They won't lose. What's been released into the public debate now has transformed the political situation. I don't believe that in any meaningful sense the miners could

distortion of the national media. Not only do they misrepresent the miners' case, they don't keep people informed about just how much support there is for the miners.

Deception

In his long political career, Tony Benn has been vilified by the press because they know he is sincere, he can't be bought off, and he speaks for a lot of ordinary people who can find no outlet for their ideas and beliefs. "...the press would not be attacking the Labour Party, or Socialism so strongly unless they knew from private polls how much support there was, and there is enormous support for what we are saying ... the Labour victory in Edinburgh (at the District Council Elections in May) was fantastic ... it's an indication of the extent of the support there is."

Diversity

Tony Benn believes that the more channels of

the Yorkshire Miner?" "There is no reason why we shouldn't build up a press of our own, the crucial thing is distribution; I should like to see Labour local authorities set up news stands, so if you went into a housing office in Edinburgh you would be able to get a newspaper you wouldn't be able to get at your local newagent."

Determination

Although Tony Benn came to Edinburgh to support and defend treasured elements of British Society - elements under attack by Mrs Thatcher and her mad monetarists: our miners, the Plan for Coal, the Welfare State, local democracy, a commitment to full and useful employment, the message he left us with in a rousing speech at the Usher Hall, was that there is a tangible victory the miners have already won - the reawakening of the hope and determination that we can achieve 'socialism in our time', a socialism that is "open, libertarian, pluralistic, humane and democratic".

Colin Bartie