

# CLOSE-UP

## Tony Benn

Tony Benn is finished. So runs the conventional political wisdom. The forces which he led in the Labour Party from 1971 to 1983 are scattered and vanquished. Benn himself cannot get elected to the shadow cabinet, and even his long-held supremacy as leader of the constituency activists on the party's executive is on the slide.

He may, as Gerald Kaufman once remarked, be one of the three most important Labour politicians of the last half century (along with Attlee and Wilson). But he is part of Labour's past, not of its present, still less its future.

The publication on October 5 of the first volume of Benn's political diaries only adds to that impression. A politician only publishes diaries at the end of a career, not midway through it. And the 660 pages covering the years 1963 to 1967 mark the start of a gargantuan published testimony from the man who has fought more parliamentary elections than any other current MP and who has more experience of cabinet office than the whole of the present shadow cabinet put together. Benn's diaries, on manuscript and cassette, are estimated to run to 8m words so far, utterly dwarfing Crossman and Castle both in completeness and accuracy. And that's not even counting the 40 manuscript volumes of his wartime diaries.

The Benn diaries will doubtless come as something of a surprise to those who can only remember him as the leader of the Labour Left in the last decade. They cover the days when he was best known as the man who had defied the rule that heirs to peerages could not renounce their titles and when, as paymaster general from 1964, then as minister for technology from 1966, he was as close as anyone to the heart and soul of the Wilson government. Students of British politics, Michael Foot wrote last year, sometimes

forget that Tony Benn was once an up-and-coming, middle-of-the-road Labour MP with an excellent chance of becoming prime minister. Ouch!

Yet Tony Benn has not retired from politics. Four years ago, his beloved Bristol seat lost to the Tories, his chances of the Labour leadership finally gone, and in poor health, he might have done. But he was only 58 and, when the opportunity of fighting the Chesterfield by-election arose, nobody could have seized it with greater determination.

Now on October 24, Benn is a co-sponsor of a conference which some of his critics see as a launching-pad for a final challenge. The conference, in Chesterfield, is billed as an opportunity for a wide range of socialist opinion to challenge the march of the new Right. Last month, Benn described it as a chance for socialists 'to reaffirm values thrust aside by recent experience'. *The Times* reinterpreted that as 'a big push to capture the soul of the shell-shocked party'.

The Chesterfield conference will inevitably be seen by Fleet Street, by the Labour leadership and by many of the participants themselves as nothing more than an attempt to reorganise Labour's Left in opposition to the avowed revisionism of Neil Kinnock and Bryan Gould. It will undoubtedly be a gathering of - among others - fundamentalists, sectarians, opportunists and bruised egos. But it would probably be wrong to see it as a springboard for anything like a Benn leadership bid.

For the interesting fact is that - in his own way - Benn has been adopting a far more conciliatory tone lately. Launching the Chesterfield conference, he stated that there should be no negative return to old ideas. 'It is certainly not our idea to engage in name-calling or idle rhetoric, nor to set up a new Socialist Party, complete



Benn: still feared by Labour's leadership

with its own candidates', he said.

In a recent article in *Campaign Group News*, Benn went even further. The Left, he wrote, should not make the mistake of engaging exclusively in an inner-party electoralism that puts campaigns for the leadership, on the national executive committee, or in parliament, above the issues that we think are important. It is the closest he has come to an outright repudiation of the tactics with which Labour's Bennites are most closely identified.

These statements have coincided with a period in which Benn's parliamentary skills seem to have been dusted off once again. He has made some of the most effective attacks on the government's attempts to ban Peter Wright's *Spycatcher* memoirs. It was Benn, too, who succeeded where Kinnock, Callaghan and Foot had all failed last January in rallying cross-party parliamentary support against the speaker's ban on the showing

of Duncan Campbell's *Zircon* film. On his day, there is still no more impressive speaker in the Labour Party.

Yet, even if Benn is finally seeking some sort of rapprochement with the Labour leadership, he seems doomed to failure. No single member of the party other than Arthur Scargill is more feared by Neil Kinnock and his immediate supporters. Party managers believe that, however popular Benn is within the party, he remains deeply unpopular with the voters. Too much blood has been spilled in the Labour Party in the last eight years for there to be any prospect of a rehabilitation.

Benn's tragedy today is that he has exhausted his wider political credibility. He is a political giant doomed to the margins by his past. Scorned by the leadership, he has too great a sense of his own historical significance to allow himself to compromise beyond a certain point. But the unbridgeability of that gap is Labour's loss too. •  
*Martin Kettle*