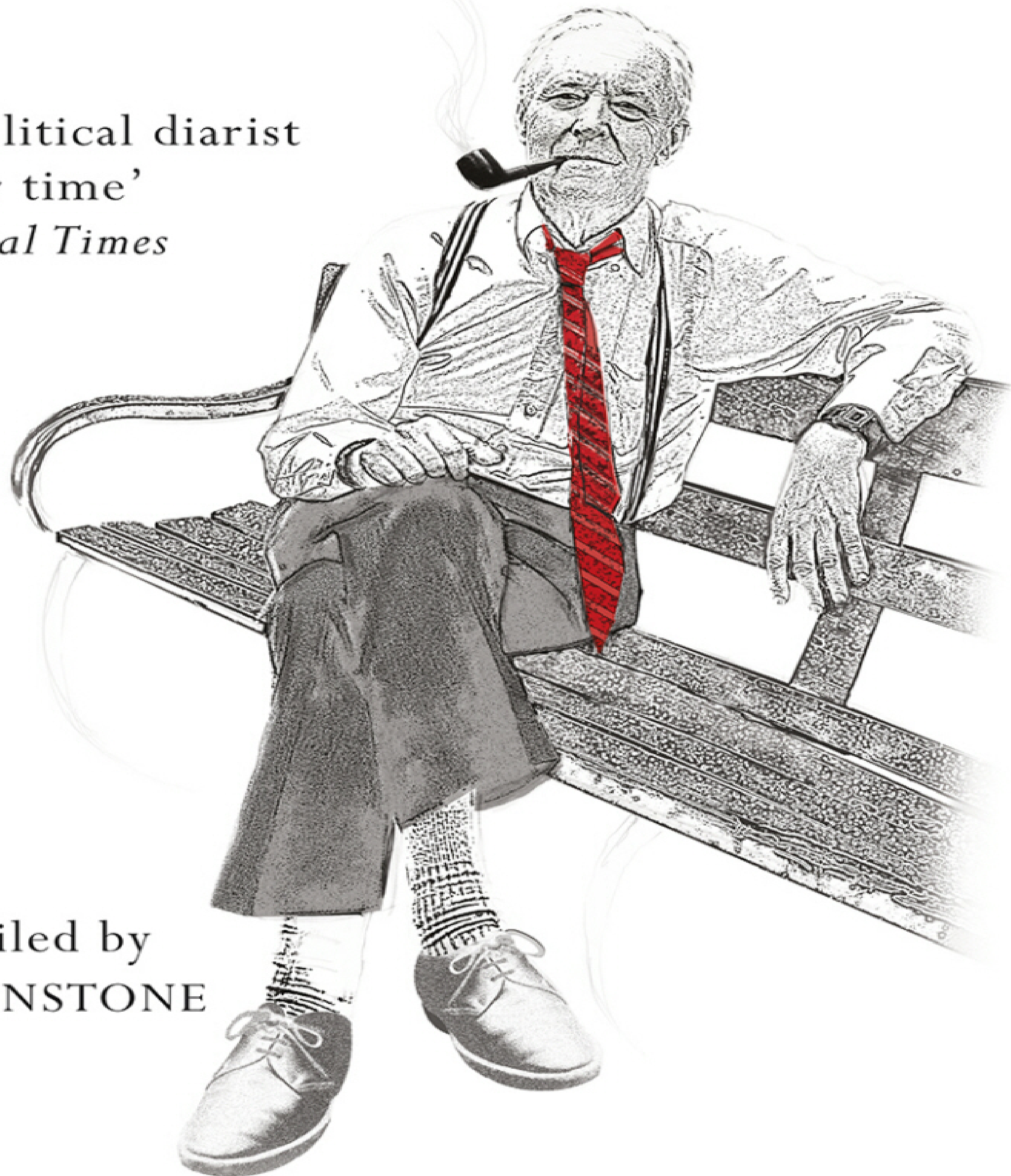
LETTERS, DIARIES, SPEECHES AND OTHER WRITINGS

THE BEST OF BENN

'The best political diarist of our time'
Financial Times



Compiled by
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About the Book

The definitive collection of diaries, memoirs, speeches, letters and other writings by Tony Benn.

THE BEST OF BENN follows the career of Tony Benn, one of the 20th century's most charismatic politicians, through the speeches, articles and interviews made and given over seven decades in the House of Commons, the *Morning Star*, the *Guardian* and to conferences and workers.

From the 'baby of the House', to a widower in his eighties touring the country, this volume showcases Tony Benn's brand of electrifiying speeches, thoughtful journalism and passionate advocacy of often unconventional causes, as well as his fascination with technological change and philosophical dilemmas.

About the Author

Radical statesman and Member of Parliament for over fifty years, Tony Benn is the pre-eminent diarist of his generation. His political activity continued after ‘retirement’ through mass meetings, broadcasts and in more recent years through social media. A widower since 2000, Tony Benn died at his home in London on 14th March 2014.

By the same author

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Letters to my Grandchildren
A Blaze of Autumn Sunshine: The Last Diaries

THE BEST OF
BENN

Edited by

RUTH WINSTONE

HUTCHINSON

Foreword

I STARTED WORKING for Tony Benn at the very end of 1985, intending to stay a few weeks transcribing his diary tapes while waiting to take up a 'proper job'. I stayed for twenty-eight years, and during those years edited ten volumes of diaries, managed the interconnected archive of his life's work and looked after a succession of young men and women – some still in their teens – who passed through his 'basement office' as work-experience students.

Everyone who knew Tony Benn will remember above all, I hope, his sense of fun and his irreverence towards authority. I have tried to reflect this aspect of his character in this collection through the inclusion, between the serious argument, of extracts from his diaries that show this mischievous side, which did not desert him despite periods of extreme political stress. In 1990 he and fellow MP Jeremy Corbyn slipped down into the Crypt chapel of the House of Commons armed with a Black & Decker drill, rawlplugs and screws to attach a brass plaque commemorating Emily Wilding Davison to the door of the cupboard where she hid in 1911. No permission was sought, or granted, of course, and the plaque is now part of parliamentary folklore.

A collection of speeches and articles that is intended to show the extent of Tony's interests and his mastery of communication is a challenge, not least because 'issues', as he would call them, that seemed crucially important in one period often become quickly forgotten or difficult to appreciate in another. For that reason some of the great

parliamentary set pieces, such as his challenge to the Speaker over the Zircon spy-satellite controversy, and the *Belgrano*–Ponting affair, have not been included, as they would require too much contextual explanation. Conversely I have included some topics more than once, because of their importance to Tony in his own parliamentary, ministerial and social career. For example, the case he made against the European Union (as it became) was restated at different times – from the 1950s to the end of the twentieth century – as he refined and developed his arguments with each change in the nature of that political entity. Likewise his interest in industrial democracy and workers' control, and the connections between Christianity and socialism, took on different hues over the years. I have also included several biting journalistic pieces (such as one on the hanging of a prisoner in Bristol jail in December 1963) that carried a wider point or lesson. Between 1964 and 1979, when he was a Labour government minister, most of Tony's thoughtful and analytical speeches were necessarily made outside Parliament.

The chapters are arranged to mirror the main phases of his life, politically and personally, from his experience of the war as a fifteen-to-nineteen-year-old and arrival in Parliament as a young man, and his rise through the Labour Party and government; through the low years of the 1980s, when I first knew him and he seemed like a caged tiger; his rebirth as a diarist; and his later years as a widower and a loving and entertaining grandfather.

Working in Tony's office, in the basement of his Holland Park family home, was never comfortable. It was a health-and-safety-free zone, which his friends in the Fire Brigades Union would have evacuated immediately. There were burglar bars at the windows, and draughts entered through every crack. But it had a charm and a fascination for visitors and politically aware young people, with its piles of documents and rows of artefacts, all meticulously

organised by Tony himself for many years. Once I started to work permanently in the ‘basement office’ I set these youngsters (known as the ‘Teabags’) the task of listing the typescripts, the Hansards, the press cuttings and the audio/video recordings that comprised the tens of thousands of items in the Benn archives, and which reflected Tony’s lifetime of service to his electorate, his constituency (Bristol and then Chesterfield), the House of Commons and audiences around the world. I am grateful to Max Shanly, a trade-union-sponsored student from Ruskin College, Oxford, for all the help and advice he gave me in finding some of the extracts for inclusion in the book.

Ruth Winstone
September 2014

Introduction

IN JANUARY 1940 a striking young man charged into the rooms of a very shy freshman at New College, Oxford. 'You're Butler, aren't you? I'm Benn. We are paired for Economics.' And so began a friendship that lasted seventy-one years, including thirty hours of taped interviews with me, describing his fight to disclaim the Stansgate peerage and to stay an MP. We did not agree politically but we never quarrelled as he climbed the political ladder – MP at twenty-five, Cabinet Minister at thirty-nine, hate figure in the 1970s, the longest serving Labour MP ever, and finally, for the last thirteen years of his life, a national monument, boasting that he had given up Parliament to devote himself full-time to politics.

He was notable for his energy – the two million words of his published diaries contain only an eighth of what he wrote nightly from 1943 to 2009. He spoke at endless meetings and maintained a huge correspondence. He changed the Constitution through his single-minded efforts to renounce his peerage. When Labour did achieve power in 1964 he became Postmaster General and then Minister of Technology. But as the 1960s advanced, he moved from the centre; Anthony Wedgwood Benn became Tony Benn while in *Who's Who* his entry became shorter and shorter, omitting details of his education. He emerged as the charismatic spokesman of the Left. He took the lead in opposing British membership of the Common Market and in advocating a referendum. He was one of the seven ministers to break Cabinet solidarity when the vote came in

1975, and for that he was demoted from Industry (where he had been enthusiastic for nationalisation) to Energy (where he was sceptical about nuclear power).

In the 1981 contest for the Labour Deputy-Leadership he was narrowly defeated by Denis Healey (he was delighted to point out that he would have won if the thirty or so MPs who deserted to the SDP had done so six months earlier). In 1983 he was defeated for his much-loved Bristol seat but he returned to the Commons in 1984 as MP for Chesterfield. In 1988 he made a final attempt at the leadership but was comfortably defeated by the incumbent Neil Kinnock. He continued to be active in the Shadow Cabinet and on Labour's National Executive but in the 1990s his influence waned and he was content to leave the Commons in 2001 to engage in an energetic retirement.

From his time in the Oxford Union (he was President in 1947) he was an outstanding orator. He was polite and unrancorous and always entertaining in private conversation. He was an inveterate pipe-smoker just as he was a hereditary abstainer from alcohol and a hereditary politician (he was the third of four generations of Benn MPs).

He met Caroline de Camp from Cincinnati at a 1948 Oxford Summer School and, marrying a year later, they settled for life in a large house in Holland Park Avenue. She became a distinguished educationist and her death in 2000 left a great gap in his life. They had four children and nine grandchildren. Like his father he flowered at the centre of a very close and supportive family.

David Butler
August 2014

CHAPTER ONE

Youth

By the age of twenty-five, Tony Benn was a Member of Parliament – the youngest MP in the House in 1950 – and a married man. Politically precocious, as you would expect of someone with two grandfathers and a father as MPs, he was also shy and somewhat naïve socially, having been brought up in a family of boys and educated in all-male institutions. In later years he reflected on the effect of these experiences on his character. Commenting on the 1950s, he described himself as a 'middle-of-the-road' Labour MP; but many of the concerns that came to define his later years as a radical – security vetting, internationalism, the honours system, the 'Europe' question (long before the UK had become a member of the then Common Market) – were being developed in his first ten years in Parliament and in articles written during 1960–63, when he was banned from the Commons, fighting the peerage case. The earliest diary entries here come from the Tony Benn journals kept during his training as a pilot. He, along with many other young recruits, was sent to Rhodesia to undergo basic flying instruction; his father and brother were both also RAF pilots. At the time of this entry Tony was nineteen.

Tuesday 6 June 1944

I went up for over an hour and a half, during which time I finished spins and started on my final and crucial task – finding out whether I will ever be able to land an aircraft. It was not until breakfast time that I heard the great news. F/O Freeman told me the real gen. He had heard General Eisenhower's broadcast announcement to the world of an Allied invasion of the French coast, and containing the gist of issued orders to the underground movement. According to German News Agency reports, Allied landings have taken place on the Cherbourg peninsula near Le Havre and on the mouth of the Seine, reports which I heard confirmed later in the day on the BBC. It appears that paratroopers have been dropped inland to capture aerodromes and that the beach landings were effected after an Armada of 4,000 big ships, and many thousand little ones, had crossed the Channel … a statement that besides the enormous numbers of aircraft involved we had a workable reserve of 11,000, allowing losses to that number, was given out by Churchill. At first this news made little impression on me and, had it not been for the service the Padre arranged at once, which took us all from our work at a quarter to twelve and gave us a moment to meditate on it all, this great day, perhaps the greatest day in the world's history, might have slipped by without the notice it deserved in my own mind …

But when the workstation gathered at midday, with clerks and fitters, officers, instructors and pupils, and the air was quiet from lack of planes, and we sang 'Onward Christian Soldiers' and 'Fight the Good Fight', I thought at once of Mike and sobered up at the prospect of the dangerous work which had been assigned to him, with the skill and courage which distinguished him from the ordinary run of pilots …

Michael was killed on 23 June 1944, seventeen days after Tony Benn's diary entry for D-Day.

My brother Michael was born in 1921, I came along in 1925, David in 1928 and Jeremy in 1935. Michael was a very thoughtful person and someone to whom I looked up with great respect, even though, like all brothers, we had fierce arguments that sometimes led to blows. Once he seized a copy of *Mein Kampf*, which I had bought when I was about twelve, and tore it apart so that, when I read it now, I have to struggle to keep the pages from flying out.

He was a keen sportsman and used to row on the Thames with the Westminster Eight, which impressed me greatly.

Influenced by my mother, Michael became very religious and, when he was at school, established a prayer circle. He used to send duplicated messages, a copy of one of which I still have. A text written in purple ink on a piece of shiny paper was turned upside-down and pressed on a jelly-like substance; further copies could be made by pressing blank pieces of paper on the jelly, which then reproduced the writing in a very faint purple colour.

In 1940, when he was nineteen, Michael went up to Gorton, Manchester, where my father was then the Labour MP, but was away at the war; Mother was standing in for Father at meetings. From there he wrote to me, 'Mother is unfortunately ill and I am doing the work which she was to have done this week. Naturally I am a little apprehensive at addressing so many meetings, especially as the first one is in a church and I shall find myself in a pulpit.' He was very competent at such a young age. A few days later he wrote, 'I had quite an enjoyable time in Gorton. I spoke for about fifty minutes three times, though I was compelled to be a bit shorter on two evening meetings on account of air raids.'

Long before his death Michael had resolved that, if he survived the war, he would seek ordination and become a Christian minister, and his letters dealt at length with both religion and politics.

> Of one thing I am sure, you cannot reconcile Christianity to the war. Christ said – 'turn the other cheek', not 'go and bomb them four times as heavily as they bombed you'. Christianity is permeated with the idea of returning good for evil. All we have done is to explain that for the sake of the future, and many other things, we are justified this time in returning evil for evil. Besides this there is the other

> question of whether you can make up for suffering by inflicting still more and whether you gain anything anyway by adding more chaos to that which already exists.
>
> It is obviously a better thing not to fight unless there is some good reason for it, so in our case we are amply justified in doing so. The whole of our future depends on winning the war as does the future of pretty well the whole world. That is justification enough. Now I'm not arguing that the war is either justified or not justified. All I am saying is that in my opinion war is unChristian and that the church ought to say so and not compromise with public opinion.

Of course, many of his letters to me were about service life and his hopes that he would be able to qualify as a pilot, which he did, serving first as a night-fighter pilot flying Beaufighters and later on Mosquitoes.

After his tours of duty in Britain, Michael was sent to North Africa, where he shot down four German planes and was decorated with the DFC, took part in the landings in Salerno, and for a period was attached to Air Marshal Hugh Pugh Lloyd's staff.

Michael was critical of the Labour Party, based in part on the fact that it was in the Coalition and, like many people with his views, Michael took an interest in the Common Wealth Party, which, led by Richard Acland, was fighting by-elections on a socialist programme.

At the end of 1943 Michael was posted back to England and began his last tour of duty flying Mosquitoes, taking part in the famous low-level attack on Amiens Prison to liberate the prisoners held there by the Germans.

On 23 June 1944, Michael took off on a mission, but discovered when he was airborne that his air-speed indicator was not working and it would therefore be

impossible to complete the mission. He was advised to drop his bombs in the sea, and another plane was asked to come in with him to indicate his air speed as he landed at RAF Tangmere in Sussex. But he overshot the runway, his plane hit the sea wall and went into the water beyond, and his neck was broken. He died later that day in St Richard's Hospital, Chichester, with my mother at his bedside, who was comforted only by the knowledge that, had he lived, he would have been totally paralysed.

Few, if any, wartime servicemen and women thought of themselves as defending the pre-war world, believing that they were fighting to prevent a return to the unemployment, poverty and militarism of the 1930s. Though Michael did not live to see it, it was those same personal convictions that were later expressed in the establishment of the United Nations and the building of the welfare state, which we then thought were objectives that made all the sacrifices worthwhile.

I greatly loved my brother Michael, and his death was a shattering blow to the whole family. The telegram arrived at the beginning of a class in Rhodesia, where I too was learning to fly. Thinking about his own life and his own ideas, I see him as a young man very much in tune with the aspirations of young people at the beginning of this century, for whom the war is a distant memory of their grandparents, although the ideas of that generation seem fresh and bright and optimistic.

My younger brother David was born when the family was in Scotland, having moved there after the Thames floods had ruined our house in London. He has always been the intellectual in the family, and was known from quite an early age as 'the professor', retaining an interest in high academic standards, which he has put to good use in his own life.

In 1935, David was suddenly taken very seriously ill with TB in his intestines, which had led to a number of lumps

developing there, and we all thought he would die. Somehow he pulled through and there is no doubt that his own willpower helped. He would never allow anyone to refer to his illness and just said, if asked, that he was 'staying in bed today', showing personal courage that inspired the whole family.

It was through his doctor, a Russian immigrant to Britain, that my brother took an interest in the Russian language. He bought Hugo's *Teach Yourself Russian* and learned it by himself, encouraged but not taught by Dr Bromley on his visits. David became so proficient that when he visited the Soviet Union later, he was treated as a native Russian and was even congratulated on his Moscow accent.

When he was sent away to Bexhill and Bournemouth with Nurse Olive, the family was deprived of his company for much of the time, and to some extent the household lost its central focus because Nurse Olive had been removed.

During the first months of his illness David was taken out for walks in a spinal carriage – a long, flat, high perambulator – and used to go and watch the Changing of the Guard at Horse Guards Parade in Whitehall. The sight of him dressed up in a toy Horse Guard's uniform, gazing up at the Household Cavalry, attracted the attention of a photographer in July 1938 and a picture appeared in a newspaper above the text, 'although he may never ride a horse, he's as smart as any Guardsman with his shining helmet, breast plate and sword'.

It was not until 1938, at the age of ten, that David was able to stand, and we have a picture of him with his emaciated legs, leaning against the wall outside the guest-house where he was staying in Bexhill; it was a tremendous triumph for him that he had managed to pull through and begin to lead a normal life.

In 1935 my mother became pregnant with her fourth child and, as it was such a surprise, we nicknamed it 'the Bombshell' and looked forward greatly to its arrival. The

birth was due in August, when we were all at Stansgate. Sadly, the pregnancy went wrong. Mother sensed that there was something amiss because one day the baby stopped kicking. But our doctor (who, we later heard, had been a drug addict) did not arrange an immediate Caesarian and, when Jeremy was born, he was dead. The doctor took the little body away in a white metal container, leaving us to grieve. My mother never forgot Jeremy and, more than ten years later, my father was determined to find the baby's body so that he could be given a proper funeral.

He went to immense trouble and finally located the woman who had worked in the doctor's surgery in Burnham. She remembered the incident and the fact that the baby had been buried in a white container in an unconsecrated part of a cemetery. My dad located it, managed to get an exhumation order from a local magistrate so that the body could be lifted; then another certificate allowed a cremation, and the baby's ashes were interred in the small church where my elder brother Michael's ashes had been laid and where my father's and mother's ashes are now buried.

This simple act gave my mother immense happiness and provided us all as a family with a chance to pay tribute to the baby brother we had never seen.

In a series of interviews with New Left Review, *thirty years after becoming an MP, Tony Benn discussed his immersion in Labour politics, under Attlee, Gaitskell and Wilson, between 1951 and 1964 – thirteen years when Labour was in opposition.*

After leaving the services, I returned to university eventually arriving at the House of Commons in 1950, just less than a year before the post-war Labour Government was defeated.

It looked at that time as though the economic problems that had brought such a huge Labour majority were to some extent proving to be soluble. There were shortages and other difficulties but I think a lot of people felt, and even at that stage I would have begun to feel, that the more radical socialist measures might not have been so necessary. I did not concern myself with economic or industrial matters at the beginning. In those early years I was probably a pretty ordinary, run-of-the-mill Labour MP concerned with civil liberties, with the colonial freedom movement, with libertarian issues generally and with the media – I worked with the BBC and one of my first speeches, in 1951, I think, was on the future role of the BBC. I served for ten years in the House of Commons before the peerage issue led to my exclusion. In that period I was made a front-bench defence spokesman; and in 1959 I was appointed Shadow Minister of Transport; I got involved in industrial policy for the first time in that capacity. I would have regarded myself as radical then but I did not join the Bevan Group – though I was invited to do so – because I felt that a left isolated from the mainstream of the Party would weaken its own influence.

The civil-liberties issues that most concerned me then have now become much more controversial, and indeed central, in the argument in the Labour Party. But at that time they were seen as marginal, and to that extent I was regarded as being out of the mainstream. I was not really involved in Bevan's critique of Gaitskell's Budget and the reintroduction of Health Service charges and the rest. I had a radical instinct in support of what Bevan was saying, but I did not engage in those central arguments. Even when it came to nuclear disarmament – a similarly divisive issue – my entry into it was on the grounds of public accountability rather than the straight question of unilateralism.

My first involvement was when I tried to put down a question about nuclear weapons, having discovered that

the Labour Government had built the atomic bomb without telling Parliament. I was sternly rebuked by Attlee, which at that time was quite frightening, I being a new Member and he being a former Prime Minister and the party leader.

I became involved in setting up the Hydrogen Bomb National Committee (in the early 1950s). This was not specifically unilateralist; it was an attempt to see nuclear weapons as a problem of foreign policy. The campaign did not go very well: it culminated in the presentation of a petition at 10 Downing Street in December 1954. (It later led to CND.)

Gaitskell put me on the front bench in 1956 as air spokesman but I resigned a year later because I was not prepared to support the first use of nuclear weapons by Britain. My interpretation of my position would be that I was slow to see unilateralism as contributing to the anti-nuclear case worldwide, but not slow to see the importance of parliamentary control over nuclear weapons and the relationship of this to foreign policy. I did not argue for unilateralism until the Cabinet discussed nuclear weapons in 1974.

A prescient speech was made by Tony in the Commons in 1956 during the Cold War at a time when the government was introducing new vetting procedures for civil servants. In it he foresaw the activities of the security services themselves, in Britain and many other countries, as constituting a potential internal threat to political freedom 'as serious as some of the external dangers against which they are intended to guard us'.

… There is a very great difference between regarding a man as unreliable because of what he thinks and regarding him as unreliable because of what he has done. My view is that, far from increasing the security of the State, if we had

a lot of police enquiries, a lot of dossiers and files designed to show what men in the Civil Service have thought in the past or think now, we would be likely to encourage such great caution on the part of those civil servants that their capacity for free thought and independent enquiry would be seriously harmed and, as a result, the State would lose some of the benefit of their services. To take an exaggerated example, far from dismissing any member of the Foreign Office who had read Karl Marx, my inclination would be to dismiss anyone who had not read Karl Marx.

… Then we come up against the question of character defect and the man living with somebody who is supposed to be a communist sympathiser. [*Interruption*.] My hon. Friend forgets that if a civil servant whose wife was a communist sympathiser left his wife he might be in trouble on the ground of character defect. I think the answer to the extremists on security is ridicule. I hope that the sense of humour which is supposed to be one of our British characteristics will always prevent us from becoming too absurd in our enquiries into the views of civil servants.

… We come to the third part of the problem. The safeguarding of the free society was the first, and the second was the dangers to which we are exposed. Now we come to the methods to be employed by the government in searching out security risks. It has already been pointed out, and I think it is worth re-emphasising, that the loyalty boards are not designed in order to catch spies, but it is purely preventive work.

‘Prevent us, O Lord, in all our doings’ in its true sense is what the security board is designed to do. Therefore we are only undertaking all these enquiries to expose certain people who might be dangerous to us.

What happens, so far as one can make out from hon. Members who have spoken, and we all have experience of this, is that the police make enquiries to find out all about a man, all that is good, bad and indifferent. That all goes

down higgledy-piggledy into the record, depending on the judgement of the man who compiles the record. It is made available to the board, which decides whether the man is suitable to be employed further or not. Then we come to the stage when the man is informed of the decision, and he has an opportunity of appealing to 'the three wise men'. Here I think there are very grave defects in the machinery provided by the White Paper.

It is argued that one cannot have an accused person interrogating witnesses because they might be doing secret work for the security forces. That might be true if a communist is confronted with non-communist police spies. At such a hearing the value of the police agents would at once disappear. But if they cannot be cross-examined by the accused himself, is that any bar to their being cross-examined by someone acting for the accused? We come back to the question of the right of advocacy on behalf of someone who is brought before the board.

Secondly, it is said that we cannot have a public trial and, in most cases, men are not charged but are brought up on suspicion. Is there any reason why a private trial should not be made more effective and more in accord with judicial procedures which we have in this country? I put these points most sincerely to the government because I believe that, when the immediate pressures of the communist world relax, sooner or later all these practices will have to be replaced by our traditional practices.

I finish with a quotation from a man who was jointly responsible for security measures in the United States with President Truman, Dean Acheson, a very distinguished American and, I believe, a very great American Secretary of State. He referred to the three presidential executive orders made in the years 1947, 1950 and 1953 which were adopted to deal with exactly this problem, and he devotes a great chapter to the problem in which he finishes with these words:

‘I was an officer of that Administration and share with it the responsibility for what I am now convinced was a grave mistake and a failure to foresee consequences which were inevitable. That responsibility cannot be escaped or obscured.’

With such an authority to support me, I ask the government to look again at the White Paper, before it becomes the established practice of this country.

Two foreign policy crises dominated 1956, Suez and Hungary, both of which preoccupied and distracted Tony Benn.

Sunday 28 October 1956

To Newport last night for a conference. Harold Finch, the Member for Bedwelty, met me and took me to his home, then into the miners’ welfare institute where there was a crowded room of serious-minded people. I spoke for an hour about the challenge of coexistence. It was a wonderful audience to address and the questions were good and pointed. One old boy in a quavering voice asked, ‘Can Mr Wedgwood Benn tell us what value he thinks the hydrogen bomb has as a detergent?’ I sat listening to the miners talking of the bad old days – the soup kitchens, the struggles with the police, the terrible hunt for work and the agony and humiliation of destitution. It was very moving and more than history – for in the crowded smoky club room were many men gasping for breath from silicosis or limping about from some industrial injury.

Today’s news is mainly of the Hungarian crisis reaching its climax. The spontaneous rebellion against the communist government has virtually succeeded. The Iron Curtain has risen and people are moving freely in and out of Hungary with supplies and relief. Mr Nagy, the Prime Minister, broadcasts further concessions every hour and the red, white and green have reappeared to replace the hated scarlet banner of the communist government. Everyone in the world is breathless with hope that this may lead to a rebirth of freedom throughout the whole of Eastern Europe.

Sunday 4 November 1956

Bought all Sunday papers. Nutting, a Minister in the Foreign Office, has resigned on principle. Russia is crushing Hungary and has issued an ultimatum. A tragic, heartbreaking day with news flashes every moment that brought us all near to weeping. The last day of freedom in Budapest and the agonising goodbye to Mr Nagy in his dramatic appeal to the world. Then the Hungarian national anthem and total, total silence.

Tuesday 15 July 1958

Father had Paul Robeson and his wife to tea at the Lords. I didn't know what to expect. I wondered if he would be an embittered Red, but my doubts were dispelled in five seconds. I have never been more quickly attracted to a personality than I was to his. He is a giant of a man, towering above us all, and has a most mobile face and greying hair. He was immensely easy to talk to. You only had to mention a song of his (or of anyone else's) for him to begin singing very softly. It was just too tempting for us to go through the ones we liked best, and it was irresistible for him to sing them. I thought it might be embarrassing to have him singing in the Lords' Tea Room, but he did it so naturally and so softly that it was only properly audible a few feet away. Beyond that it must have reverberated like some Tube train passing deep beneath the building.

Afterwards I took him to the Commons Gallery for a moment and through the lobbies down to the Terrace. It was a journey of triumph. Everybody gathered round – MPs, police, visitors, waitresses from the Tea Room – for, unlike most celebrities who make you want to stare, Paul Robeson made you want to shake him by the hand. Two Negro women from Florida were almost ready to embrace him. A jet-black Nigerian was touched as if by a magic wand, and nearly split his face with a smile. You just couldn't help feeling that Robeson was a friend of everyone there. He greeted people as if he knew them, and those he really knew he remembered. There was no hint of embarrassment, whoever it was who came up. Herbert Morrison shook him by the hand on the way out and, as we marched down St Stephen's Hall, the crowds queuing for the Strangers' Gallery stood and lined the route as if it were a triumphal march.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century and right up almost to his death in 2014 Tony Benn was developing and refining his opposition to what was known in 1963 (before Britain joined) as the Common Market of