

Attlee Lecture 98 – Rt. Hon. Tony Benn MP – Monday 9 February 1998

Royal Overseas League

I met Clem Attlee 61 years ago this month in the House of Commons. My father had just been re-elected for Gorton as a Labour member. I went to see him take his seat, and I spoke to Lloyd George and Clem. He was then leader of the opposition and I was enormously proud, as any 12-year-old would be, to meet such a distinguished man.

Also I was present in 1945 in Transport House when the election results were announced. We were in Transport House watching the results, and they flashed up the results on an epidiascope (you scratched the results on a bit of smoked glass and it came up) and as the Tory ministers tumbled it was obvious this was a landslide. It was a hot July day, a fortnight after polling day because they had to leave time for the soldiers' votes to be counted, then the door opened and coming in blinking from the bright sunshine was Clem. He'd been in Potsdam with Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt. He'd flown back to Northolt, got in a police car which didn't have a radio and I saw him at the very moment that he realised he had won the election. A BBC man pushed a microphone into my face and said "*Will you say three cheers for the Prime Minister?*" but I was very shy, I still am, and somebody else said it. What a marvelous election that was. I was on leave from the RAF as a pilot, and I was in a troop ship when Churchill delivered that absolutely abominable speech saying "*if you vote Labour there will be a Gestapo*". If I was establishing a Gestapo I wouldn't have picked Clem to run it!

I got back to Britain and I was asked to drive a loudspeaker van to take round the wife of the Labour candidate - a young woman called Peggy Ashcroft, married to Jeremy Hutchinson the Labour candidate. We canvassed Number 10. It was before Mrs Thatcher's gates went up but there were guards with tin hats and bayonets and sandbags and Jeremy Hutchinson, a lawyer, said to them "*I've got the Representation of the People Act here and there is somebody on my register at number 10, I'd like to have a word with him*". So we went up to Number 10 and the whole domestic staff were brought out - it was like Upstairs Downstairs - and said to the butler "*I'm Jeremy Hutchinson, the Labour candidate*" and the butler said "*We're all Conservative in this house*" and the maid at the back with a bonnet (I gave her full marks for her guts) said "*or we'd lose our jobs if we weren't*".

And then, a couple of weeks later the removal van called to take away Churchill's furniture. I can't describe the atmosphere. I drove this loudspeaker van and I drove into a taxi in Covent Garden. So I got out and I said over the loudspeaker, "*You've just been struck by the Labour candidate*" and people cheered. I was in Central Hall Westminster on the evening that Clem came back from the palace and announced that he'd been appointed Prime Minister.

I am the last Labour MP to have been in the Commons when he was Prime Minister, I had tea at Number 10 with other new Members - it was the day that Churchill had asked Attlee why an American admiral had been put in charge of the North Atlantic NATO Command. Clem didn't have a clue, and Vi absolutely went for him at tea. "*Clem you've let us all down*". Clem was totally shaken by this onslaught.

You know Clem was very famous for only reading the cricket scores, and Births, Deaths and Marriages - his interest in the press was totally limited to that. I had a letter from him one day - I'd only been in parliament a week - saying "*Dear Tony, congratulations on the birth of a daughter I hope that mother and child are doing well*". Well I knew it was a mistake so I looked up The Times that day and it said "Maureen", - my wife is Caroline. So I wrote back to him, rather cheekily, "*Dear Prime Minister, I feel as you're the leader of the Party I ought to tell you I'm not the father of the child*", but as my wife had told me that morning that she was pregnant I added "*Your congratulations have come 9 months too soon.*"

And Clem also saw my father in the smoking room and said "*Wedgie, I hear you're going to be a grandfather*" which was the first my father had heard of it.

I was rebuked by him once for asking a question I shouldn't have asked about nuclear weapons. I produced the first ever Party Political TV broadcast from Walthamstow Town Hall and it was a tremendous thing. It was planned that Vi would ask in the middle "*What about the pensioners, Clem?*" Well something went wrong and it never happened. Clem was very brief so we thought we would have 15 questions. Well he polished them all off in about 8 minutes and we didn't know what to do, so the person interviewing him asked "*But, Mr. Attlee, isn't it true that the gold and oil reserves are lower than when you left office?*"

hoping to get him to talk about Labour's economic achievement and Clem said *"That may very well be so"*.

I would like to talk about Clem Attlee as a socialist.

The establishment has a way of taking people and sanitising them when they die. I have been to quite a number of funerals of good socialists, but once in the Abbey, the establishment forgives them for their errors, and immediately elevates them to the safety of respectable old statesman. And Clem was of course all those things - he was a Companion of Honour, he had a Garter, he had an earldom and so on. But his role in history will be remembered as a very radical man, and I've been helped in my quotes by Kenneth Harris's marvellous biography. .

In 1937 Clem in his book, "Labour Party in Perspective" wrote this about his early days:

"Some thirty years ago" said Clem "when I was a young barrister just down from Oxford, I engaged in various forms of social work in East London. The conditions of the people in that area as I saw them at close quarters led me to study their causes and to reconsider the assumptions of the social class to which I belonged." Because he came from an upper middle class family. *"I became an enthusiastic convert to Socialism.. Circumstances have called me to occupy a position of high responsibility in the movement. Throughout these years I have never wavered in my faith in the cause of Socialism. I have never lost my early enthusiasm. I have never doubted that the Labour Party, whatever faults or failings it may have" (he would have known them all) "is the only practical instrument in this country for the attainment of a new order of society."*

And then he went on in the same book, which I quote again later,

"I think that probably the majority of those who have built up the Socialist movement in this country have been adherents of the Christian religion" It's said that the Labour Party owes more to Methodism than to Marx, and I don't think Clem ever read Marx deeply or he didn't admit to it. *"Christian religion – and not merely adherents, but enthusiastic members of some religious bodies. Not only the adherents of dissenting bodies.. but also many clergy and laymen of the Established Church, found that the Capitalist system was incompatible with Christianity..In no other country has Christianity been converted to Socialism to such an extent as in Britain."*

You'd be expelled for saying that now, in the "New Labour" Party, so I thought it might be worth reminding you of his own interpretations at the time when he was already the leader of the Opposition. He was the mayor of Limehouse and believed passionately in local government which has been virtually strangled in recent years. His maiden speech in the House of Commons says:

"the real contest is between Capital and Labour... I stand for life against wealth ... I demand the organisation of the country in the interests of all as a co-operative commonwealth in which land and capital will be owned by the nation and used for the benefit of the community ... a levy on capital will relieve the taxpayer and lower prices"

And again, that's very radical stuff. And yet it was those views that brought him to his position as leader of the party and, indeed, as prime minister to carry out the policies that he did. In his speech in the Commons in 1922, the same month he was elected, he said:

"Why was it that in war we were able to find employment for everyone? It was simply that the Government controlled the purchasing power of the nation.... That is what we are demanding shall be done in time of peace. As the nation was organised for war and death, so it can be organised for peace and life if we have the will for it."

Clem's emphasis was on will. You could have lots of ideas, but it was the will that mattered; the word workmanlike was also very close to his mind. He always believed that plans had to be workmanlike. He became Postmaster General, a post in which I followed him, and when he left the Post Office he wrote an article in the "New Statesman (which I studied when I became Postmaster General because I read the history of all my predecessors) in which he suggested that when coal was nationalised, there should be a Coalmaster-General!

He was absolutely opposed to Ramsay MacDonald's national government, which MacDonald described in his own words:

"I wonder how far it is possible, without in any way abandoning any of our Party positions... to consider ourselves more as a Council of State and less as arrayed regiments facing each other in battle...so that by putting our ideas into a common pool we can bring out...legislation and administration that will be of substantial benefit to the country as a whole."

That has all the connotations of so-called “inclusive” politics of today. After the collapse of the Labour government when MacDonald formed a national government, Clem wrote to his brother Tom:-

“The real trouble to my mind has been the failure of Snowden” (Chancellor of the Exchequer) “all through to face the financial situation. He has always rather slavishly followed City opinion while JRM [MacDonald] has been far too prone to take his views from bankers and big business”

It’s difficult when you read all this not to hear some contemporary voices echoing in your mind. Attlee succeeded Lansbury as leader when the latter resigned after a very violent speech by Ernie Bevin at the Labour Conference.

In 1937 Clem said:-

“The dominant issue of the twentieth century is Socialism. The evils that capitalism brings differ in intensity in different countries but, the root cause of the trouble once discerned, the remedy is seen to be the same by thoughtful men and women. The cause is the private ownership of the means of life; the remedy is public ownership”

You haven’t heard that for quite a while. And then he went on to say:

“The possession of property in a Capitalist society has given liberty to a fortunate minority who hardly realise how much its absence means enslavement. The majority of the people of this country are under orders and discipline for the whole of their working day. Freedom is left behind when they ‘clock in’ and only resumed when they go out. Such liberty as they have got as workers has been the fruit of long and bitter struggles by the Trade Unions.”

Now when did you last hear that said by a Labour minister? And then he goes on:

“The whole organisation of the country is based on the superior rights of the wealthy. Nothing is sacred to the profit-maker.”

Well, I quote these because it gives you an understanding of the hold that Clem had on the Labour Party but also on the appeal he had to the public in 1945. Clem never attacked anybody in his life, and if I read the Labour manifesto 'Let us face the future', which I distributed in the Westminster constituency with Peggy Ashcroft, I find those words quite exciting.

"The great inter-war slumps were not acts of God" said the Labour Party manifesto "or of blind forces. They were the sure and certain result of the concentration of too much economic power in the hands of too few men. These men had only learned how to act in the interest of their own bureaucratically-run private monopolies which may be likened to totalitarian oligarchies within our democratic State. They had and they felt no responsibility to the nation"

And then we come to another very typical Clem phrase:

"the test of a political programme is whether it is sufficiently in earnest about the objectives to adopt the means needed to realise them. It is very easy to set out aims...What matters is whether it is backed up by a genuine workmanlike plan, conceived without regard for sectional vested interests and carried through in a spirit of resolute concentration"

Now, just to finish it off, in case you thought in his old age he went soft, (because it does happen) in 1955, this was the year he resigned, just after he fought his last election campaign and was defeated, he said this:

"I don't want us, when we come in again to be swept in by some temporary discontent. I want to come in because a larger number of people have accepted the Socialist Creed."

That was a man about to enter the House of Lords as an earl but with his faith undiminished.

Finally, there is his view on the European Economic Community:-

“I do not believe” said Clem in 1962 “it would be wise to enter the Common Market on the terms which seem to be contemplated by Mr Heath and the present Government. We should not be justified in hastily handing over substantial power now held by the British Parliament and electorate to untried institution.” Then in an article in the Sunday Express Clem wrote:- “I say, halt – Britain must not become merely a part of Europe.”

Now that is a Clem you have to rescue from the encrustation of his title and his official reputation. That was the man who caught the imagination of the party and the public and it interests me! Great achievements he had, both domestic and, particularly, in the ending of the Indian Empire. I remember Dingle Foot telling me that he would be called into the Cabinet occasionally. I think he was a Minister of Economic Warfare. When Churchill was in the Chair, he would give a lecture for 45 minutes on world history and the role of Alexander the Great, and you left the Cabinet not knowing at all what you had to do. When Clem was there he said: ‘What is it? Right. You want that? Agreed, Right’ You were out in 30 seconds and you knew exactly what you had to do. Now that was Clem, and what a formidable man he was, his leadership was really quite remarkable..

I think the Labour government began to get into difficulties when the Cold War became as threatening as it did. There’s no doubt the Korean War was very, very serious. I heard Aneurin Bevan’s resignation speech in 1951; Clem was ill at the time and Herbert Morrison had helped to manoeuvre the situation that led to Nye going, but that programme was something we couldn’t sustain economically. Even Churchill had to cut it back, later.

I’m not sure I agreed with everything Nye said at the time and it was couched in violent language. But the Cold War really represented a threat to the democratic, domestic, diverse, humanitarian, pluralistic, socialism for which Clem stood all his life. And then after the 1951 defeat he was Chairman of the Parliamentary Party, that was before that job was separated from the leadership of the party, and he had all these problems to deal with. He did retain a very, very powerful commitment, despite the Cold War, to international peace and I remember a very formidable speech just after the hydrogen bomb was tested at Bikini, where he called for a Summit. He was of course, towards the end of his life at any rate, a firm believer in world government.

Clement Attlee was the greatest leader the Labour Party has ever had, and we would do well to re-examine the roots of his Socialist Faith as well as his formidable achievements in office.

Today all he stood for is being systematically repudiated by 'New Labour', but we would do well to compare what he believed in with what is now presented to us as the Radical Centre of British politics supposedly committed to modernising our society.

Full employment, the welfare state, social equality, the NHS, free at the point of use, and full trade union rights which characterised the government he led, are now regularly denounced as 'Old Labour', the party of 'Tax and Spend', never to return.

Clement Attlee was a signatory of the United Nations Charter, and he flew to Washington, I know it because it was during my by-election in 1950, he flew to Washington to warn President Truman, against the use of atomic weapons against Korea.

By contrast, a few days ago another Labour Prime Minister flew to Washington to pledge his full support for President Clinton, in launching air strikes against Iraq, in clear contravention of the United Nations charter which provides that only the Security Council can authorise military force.

Clem Attlee didn't possess charisma, which is now regarded as a pre-requisite for those seeking office, but, in 1945 he defeated a man who certainly did possess it and it didn't stand him in very good stead.

He was a man of character and integrity, and though famous for the brevity of his language, to which I have referred, his answers were always clear unlike today's shallow sound bites, which are often quite meaningless.

Clem Attlee did not believe in the cult of personality, but despite this and his modesty of manner he presided over, and led, and held together a cabinet of giants who really did change Britain, and he was inspired by socialism, which today is more relevant than ever.

The modern Labour Party would do well in my opinion to re-examine the relevance of what Attlee said, and did, if we are to meet the challenges now confronting humanity, which bear a dangerous resemblance to those which brought Clem into public life.

For unemployment, poverty, despair and injustice, which threaten democracy and peace, are an inevitable consequence of the globalisation of the world economy, which is nothing more than crude capitalism, re-appearing under a new name.

The Cold War was a disaster for democratic socialism, because any criticism of capitalism meant you must be a traitor, and the Cold War was used to blank out domestic and highly democratic socialism.

The story of the Soviet Union is such an interesting one that I don't think any serious historian has started to turn their mind to the effect of the Russian revolution. I say this with no brief for the Stalin regime, but the fact that there was an anti-capitalist super power in the world undoubtedly forced the establishment to make concessions to the working class which they would never have made if they hadn't thought that there might be a revolution here. Similarly, the mere existence of the Soviet Union contributed very greatly to the liberation of the old British colonies. My father was Secretary of State for India and had much correspondence with Lord Irwin in 1929-31. The real fear then was that India might go communist if we didn't make concessions. The Russian revolution undoubtedly frightened the British establishment just as the French revolution had done a hundred and fifty years earlier.

The post-war consensus that Clem represented (and it did come out of the wartime government under Winston Churchill who was an old liberal imperialist - he wasn't a Tory at all). Churchill banned Sunday shopping. Churchill introduced the Wages Council. That consensus lasted for about only 25 years from about 1945 to about 1970.

I remember sitting in the Cabinet in 1969, just before we were defeated, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer Roy Jenkins said that we would only get support from the international financial community if we controlled money supply - I had to go back to my schoolbooks to find out what money supply was. Don't think that monetarism began with Mrs Thatcher -

no, it was under Roy Jenkins. Ten years before she came to power the arguments for monetarism were already being presented.

If you look at the world in 1997, it is interesting to see what has happened.

First of all we are all customers now. I travel up and down to Chesterfield every week and the ticket collector the other day said: "Customers who boarded the train at Derby will please look after their baggage" So when he came round I said to him: "I don't want to be discourteous" (he's a member of RMT the train rail union) "but I'm a passenger. I'm not a customer". "Oh, no" he said, - he had a book from Railtrack - "you're a customer". So I said "Well if I go to hospital for an operation, am I a patient or a customer?" Well, Railtrack didn't actually advise him on that one. I said: "Does the Archbishop of Canterbury pray for our beloved customers. Does the Queen talk about our customers here and abroad?"

If you haven't any money you can't be a customer. So homeless people on the streets of London who need houses more than any one else, aren't customers. You can disregard them.

I was asked to go to a school the other day in Chesterfield, a business studies course. The teacher whom I knew whispered to me when I went in, 'Tony, I used to teach social studies but that's illegal under the national curriculum so now I'm teaching business studies.' So I said 'Well, what's the project?' 'Well,' she said, 'the local education authority is closing this school and this little group' and she pointed to six keen children 'have got to maximise the profits from the sale of the site'.

She pointed to one lad and said: 'He's a property developer and he is trying to see whether he can get a good deal' She pointed to somebody else and said 'Chairman of a housing company that might want to build houses on the playground'. Then she pointed to somebody else who was the most miserable kid in the class, and said 'he's the headteacher trying to improve his redundancy pay' So, I said to the children 'Is it about profit?' 'Oh yes' they said, they were so keen to please the teacher.

So I said 'Well, are you sure building a few houses is the best way to make money? Have you thought about prostitution? There are a lot of girls in the school who could make much more money than that, or making flick knives in the laboratory for football fans, or why don't you open the playground to toxic waste from all over the world, you could make millions

more' and the teacher's face fell a mile! So then I said to the kids 'Do you want to close the school?' and they forgot they were studying business. 'Oh no' they said 'my dad was here, my uncle was here, my sister can't wait to come.' And I said 'Well, why don't you forget the whole damn thing and march on Matlock to keep the school open.'

But a whole generation of children are being indoctrinated into the idea that profit is more important than education. I'm in favour of co-operation. I don't want to compete with people. I want to co-operate. Admittedly, if somebody sells me a cheaper bar of soap I might want to buy it but I don't want to treat other people as competitors.

There is a good story about a fictional boat race between the national health service and a Japanese crew. They both worked long and hard to maximise their performance and the Japanese won by a mile; so they set up a working party as they always do in those circumstances. And the working party concluded that the Japanese had 8 people rowing and 1 steering and the NHS had 8 people steering and 1 rowing. So, the NHS employed consultants, which is what you do when a crisis of that kind occurs, and 18 months and about £5million later, the consultants confirmed that diagnosis and recommended that the NHS crew be completely restructured. There should be 3 assistant steering managers, 3 deputy steering managers and a director of steering services and the rower be given an incentive to row harder. And they had another race and the Japanese won by 2 miles, so they laid off the rower for poor performance, and they sold the boat and used it to give a higher than average pay award to the director of steering services.

Now, you know, that's not so very far wrong is it. Keir Hardie said at the beginning of this century: *'The choice for this century is do we worship God or Mammon?'*

Well I can tell you who we chose: we chose to worship Mammon, and the cathedrals that we have are decaying, and the banks and places are growing in strength. There's a widening gap between rich and poor. 358 billionaires have got the same income as half the population of the world put together. Now, even if I believed in that system, which I do not, can anyone honestly think you can live in a peaceful world where the gap between rich and poor is as wide as that? When half a million women die every year in childbirth for lack of proper treatment, 60,000 babies die every week in the third world. It isn't actually going to work.

And at the same time the arms trade is growing like anything. I remember one of the things that inspired me in 1945 as a keen young pilot, (I lost a brother and many comrades in the war) was when I read the Charter of the United Nations, article 1, “We the people of the United Nations determine to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind.” I was moved by it, I still am. And now 85% of the weapons sold in the world are sold by the 5 permanent members of the Security Council, including many that went to Saddam Hussein because we armed him right up until the Kuwait invasion. This is really something we have to think about more fundamentally.

One of the great paradoxes for me is that the problems facing the world are difficult, challenging, interesting, exciting but the level of political debate is shallow, abusive, personal and unsatisfactory. And that’s what I like about Clem's writing and his approach. He didn’t go for attacking anybody. He went for the guiding principles of society to try and see if he could put them right. Therefore, in choosing this subject, I wanted to try and get beyond Attlee as a Statesman, as a Cabinet minister, as a Prime Minister, as a man who led the party, to really what it was that moved him.

He did not accept what we now call modernisation. I was looking the other day at the Poor Law Act introduced by a Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer who happened to be Princess Diana’s ancestor, Lord Althorp (later Earl Spencer) and his speech in the House of Commons in 1834. He said ‘There’s been a terrible abuse of the welfare system. The welfare bill in 1789 was £2million and it’s risen to £8million and we can’t have it.’ So he introduced the workhouses - a piece of modernisation. The arguments about the deserving and the undeserving poor are all there to be found in that debate. One member got up and said ‘They’ve solved the problem in America. In Massachusetts they’ve abolished all welfare and poverty has disappeared.’ Well that’s the Wisconsin experience we’re now hearing about today from that great democrat, President Clinton, who, as a result of following this principle of adopting the policy of your opponents got elected with 20% of the vote. 80% of the Americans didn’t vote for him, didn’t register, or voted against him.

The politics of a radical centre that collapse, leaving you with no choice except the language of ‘modernisation’, I think is in serious danger.

I remember Attlee with increasing affection as I get older. And I remember him as a teacher. He saw the importance of hope as a motive force, whereas fear drives you into yourself. I also see him as a man with something to offer us in the next century. Just as the pendulum swung away from welfare towards this mad individualism that has gripped us, now I think it is moving in a different direction.

Communism and Social Democracy both failed in this century. Communism lacked democracy and collapsed. Social Democracy collapsed because many social democrats abandoned it completely and adopted capitalism and called it 'new politics'. Clem saw socialism as common sense. That's the way he interpreted it. Not as some great ideological fervour but in the sense that if you addressed your mind to the problems you would see that there was a better way of solving them than treating money as the only guide to action. I think that was his greatest contribution.

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Questions

Alan Lee Williams

“Tony, I immensely enjoyed your lecture, particularly the beginning sentences or two about Clement Attlee evoked many fond memories of that particular government. My question to you is this, that one of the men that he greatly admired in that Labour cabinet was Ernest Bevin, a man who ran with Marshal Aid, and has been credited with Dean Aitcheson in establishing NATO. And that is a lasting monument to that government which still has a role to play in the modern world. The other one was Aneurin Bevan whose monument to the world still stands in spite of the challenges to it, and that was the National Health Service. Are you happy with both those propositions?”

Tony Benn

“Well, if you take the NATO proposition, you see NATO was a product of the Cold War and the general assumption was that the Red Army was waiting to invade Britain. I don't believe that was true at all. I mean after all they couldn't even beat Chechnya so they were unlikely to have defeated the forces of the West. And I think that whole idea was politically inspired. I mean I was never sympathetic to the ideas but I don't think that was what it was about and I think that from 1917 to the fall of the Berlin wall it was the absolute determination of Western governments to destroy Communism completely. And therefore they first of all invaded it. That was the war of intervention. Then during the 30's they supported Hitler. If you read the captured German foreign office documents you'll find that Halifax went to Baptingraten (?) and his opening words were “Herr Chancellor I come to congratulate you on behalf of the British Government for having defeated communism in Germany and acting as a bulwark against communism in Europe.” And the Cold War began before the last war was over and it wasn't until I went to Japan in 1983 that I realised that, far from using the atom bomb in order to bring the war to an end, the Japanese had offered to surrender before the atom bomb had dropped, so long as they could keep the Emperor. Well the Americans wanted them to do that anyway to see Japan didn't go communist. So that was a warning to Russia that America had a weapon of overwhelming power, now don't misunderstand me. I've no sympathy with their way of running it but I do think that the whole NATO enterprise was seen by them to be aggressive and in the end, in a way, Russia bankrupted itself with

military expenditure that it didn't need. So I would interpret that a bit differently. I understand it because at the time I went along with NATO, I went along with the re-armament programme, a bit uneasy about it, because I was brought up on collective security and that was the thinking I had. But when I look back on it I've come to a different conclusion.

On the health service, of course, that was really fantastic. Its now eroded to a large extent with Prescription charges, you can't get a dentist unless you register, you have to wait, and if you're a bit too old, then they don't necessarily bother because they are under heavy pressure. But the idea that you should have medical treatment in accordance with need and not wealth was an absolute revolution. It was pure socialism actually. It didn't matter who owned the buildings, what mattered was the guiding principle upon which health was based: it was based on need and not wealth and so I would go along with that, and Ernie, after all, did the best he could. I'm not criticising Ernie, he was a part of that philosophy of the time. But I think when history comes to be written the Cold War will be seen as one of the greatest tragedies of all. That at the end of a massive war, weapons were built up when we should have been using the money to develop living standards in Russia and the West."

Philip Maxwell

"Thank you for a wonderful lecture Tony, I thought your reference to Clem Attlee going over to see Truman to tell him not to drop the atom bomb was particularly relevant to contemporary events and I was thinking when you were discretely looking at what's happening today and referring us back to the time of Clem Attlee about a meeting that apparently occurred between Rupert Murdoch and Margaret Thatcher and apparently Rupert Murdoch was asking about Tony Blair, whether he was really or not, and Margaret Thatcher said "Don't worry about Tony, he's a patriot". You've always been a great advocate of the Labour Party and indeed I have been a member of the Party all my life, and whenever things start going bad, and we seem to be following an agenda which isn't part of our principles, you always say well we must stay within the Labour Party and of course this was always the point that Clem Attlee made: it's the only vehicle for achieving Socialism. And its refreshing to hear you use the word so often as most Labour MPs actually don't use that word very often today. If in a few weeks time, we have bombing of Iraq with full support from the British government for that process, and you always talk about the

pendulum coming back, and I agree to a certain extent the pendulum is coming back, but the Labour party has shifted so much in recent years that when you go to the Labour party conference the working class base has gone entirely. And I was wondering will you, once and if Iraq is bombed and once single parents no longer have the benefits that we feel they should be entitled to, is there a time when we actually draw a line and say enough is enough and is there any possibility of people like Tony Benn being socially excluded from the Labour Party and being independent Labour Party members?"

Tony Benn.

"Well, I get asked that question a lot but I must tell you I spend most of my time writing to people answering it and saying stick with it. Because you see I'm not a member of New Labour. New Labour is a completely new political party. I've heard about it, I'm interested in it but I'm not a member of it. And it has repudiated everything that the Labour Party stood for. Roy Hattersley, not exactly a radical left-winger, at the end of his book called "Fifty Years in Perspective" said New Labour succeeded where militant failed in taking over the Labour party, I'm not quoting him exactly, and repudiating all the things for which it had stood for 50 years. So I see New Labour as a new party. I think there's a sort of parallel. I mean I wonder about whether we'll have a coalition government. That's one of the reasons I dwelt a little bit on 1931 because not only is Paddy Ashdown in a Cabinet Committee but a speech was made recently by the Prime Minister calling for a patriotic alliance and Heseltine queued up because he's always the first when there's something going on. And he's taken over the Millennium Dome – I hope they both collapse at about the same time. I do wonder about that. I joined the Labour Party on my 16th birthday. I walked to Transport House, because I lived nearby and I joined it and I intend to die in the Labour Party, but not yet. And the problem really is, in Britain there are too many Socialist parties and not enough socialists. And then there's Arthur Scargill has gone off on his own, there's Militant expelled, there's the Socialist Workers Party, there are endless sectarian groups, but what we need...(end of tape)."