

Progressive dilemmas after the election

David Marquand interviewed by Ben Jackson

With the fraught relationship between Labour and the Liberal Democrats now at the centre of British political debate, few are better placed to comment on the present conjuncture than David Marquand. Marquand's career has spanned the worlds of political activism and political analysis, including a period as the Labour MP for Ashfield (1966-77), a key role in the founding and early life of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in the 1980s, and periods in academia, as Professor of Politics at Salford University and then Sheffield University, and as Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford.

Marquand's unique combination of political experience and intellectual interests have made him an influential commentator on the politics and history of the British left. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including Ramsay MacDonald (1977); The Unprincipled Society (1988); The Progressive Dilemma (1991); The Decline of the Public (2004); and most recently, Britain Since 1918: The Strange Career of British Democracy (2008).

A recurring theme of all of these works has been Marquand's staunch advocacy of a pluralist social democracy that takes seriously both the insights of the British liberal tradition – especially the new liberalism of the Edwardian period – and the social democratic egalitarianism associated with the Labour Party. In this interview, Marquand reflects on his career, on the development of his political thought, and on the prospects for pluralist social democracy in the Cameron-Clegg era.

From Gaitskell to the Greens

I would like to start by asking about your personal political journey. In the course of your career you have moved from the Labour Party to the SDP to the Liberal Democrats to New Labour and then away from New Labour. In your most recent writings you have expressed sympathy for the Green Party. How far do you see these changes in party affiliation as reflecting an evolution in your own political views, or is it more a matter of your political views staying the same while your judgement of the most appropriate practical vehicle for these views shifted?

It was a bit of both. My change to the SDP from the Labour Party was a matter of ideological consistency. I had been a revisionist social democrat, or Gaitskellite, in the Labour Party, and I was also strongly pro-European. In the Labour Party of the late 1970s it became more and more difficult to get a hearing for these views. I wasn't just a member of the SDP, I played an active part in its foundation. I was one of a small group of people who tried to prepare the way for the saviour, namely Roy Jenkins, when he came back from

Features liberals and social democrats

Brussels. I believed the same sort of things that I had believed, fairly consistently, since I first got involved in electoral politics in the 1960s, so there was no great change in my views then. However, my views did evolve a lot in the course of the 1980s and still more subsequently.

I supported a merger between the SDP and the Liberal Party, partly as a matter of ideological consistency as I then thought, and partly as a pragmatic necessity. There clearly wasn't room for two 'third parties', as was demonstrated by the result of the 1987 election when the SDP-Liberal Alliance did worse than in 1983. At that time I lived in the High Peak constituency in Derbyshire and I stood there as the Alliance candidate in 1983. I was very involved both with the local SDP and with the local Liberals and it was clear to me that when you looked at them on the ground there was virtually nothing to distinguish them from each other. They were essentially the same sort of people wanting to do the same sort of things.

However, I got more and more sympathetic towards Kinnock's Labour Party or rather to what Kinnock managed to do with the Labour Party. I was no fan of Kinnock in the early 1980s, but it seemed to me that by 1992 he had virtually (not single-handedly, of course) changed the Labour Party into what I had always wanted it to be, namely a European social democratic party. This made me increasingly hostile to the Liberal Democrats' line in the 1992 election. They struck a pose of equidistance between the two larger parties and engaged in a lot of Labour-bashing. I got more and more fed up with that and I left the Liberal Democrats at some point after the 1992 election (to be honest I can't remember when). I didn't make a great song and dance about it but I stopped paying my membership fees.

When Blair became leader of the Labour Party, I was very enthused – above all by his brilliant and courageous campaign to delete the old Clause IV from the party constitution. This was what Gaitskell had fought for thirty years before, and had failed to do. Now Blair had done it! It seemed to me that the least I could do was to demonstrate my support for this achievement by re-joining the Labour Party, which I did. But I pretty soon repented.

The first term of the Blair government I thought (and still think) was very impressive. But even then, there were some worrying signs. By this time I was Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford and my various roles as such left me little time for anything else. But, in so far as I did watch politics in the Labour Party, I thought there was a rather ugly, authoritarian streak in New Labour – not in terms of national policy but in terms of party management. That alarmed me. The Alastair Campbell/Philip Gould axis seemed bent on stamping out dissent and, in the ghastly phrase of the time, keeping everyone 'on message'.

I was also alarmed by the tone of Blair's famous Chicago speech setting out his new doctrine of liberal interventionism. Even then I didn't like the sound of that, and as events unfolded during the 2001 parliament I became more and more unhappy with the direction the Blair government was taking. I wrote a lot of angry pieces criticising the Iraq war, and I became more and more worried by what seemed to me to be the authoritarianism of the so-called 'War on Terror' and the flood of illiberal measures that went through the House of Commons in the wake of 9/11. The whole rhetoric of the 'War on Terror' seemed to me (and still seems to me) to be lunatic. You can't wage a war on terror. Terrorism is not an entity; it is a technique of waging asymmetrical warfare. Anyway, I got more and more disgusted with Blair's government and the party that supported it, and at some point (again, I can't remember exactly when) I left the Labour Party for the second time.

RENEWAL Vol 18 No. 3/4

As for the way in which my views have evolved, if you look at my writings, you will see a fairly steady progression away from what I would now call 'statist' social democracy to something much closer to the republican tradition of politics. In my latest book, *Britain Since 1918*, I identify four distinct strands of rhetoric and feeling in our political culture. One of them I call democratic republicanism and another democratic collectivism. In the 1960s I was a democratic collectivist. By the 2000s I had become a democratic republican.

Realigning the left

*You have been an eloquent advocate of the idea of realignment on the left, by which is usually meant closer cooperation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. This is a key idea that emerged from your book *The Progressive Dilemma*, which was a very influential work, especially in the 1990s. Blair and a lot of the people around him seemed to adopt wholesale some of the book's rhetoric and historical analysis.*

David Miliband was very instrumental in that. Blair gave a lecture to a Fabian meeting just after he became leader of the Labour Party on the fiftieth anniversary of Labour's victory in 1945 and large chunks of it could have been taken from *The Progressive Dilemma* – certainly the analysis was. I think Blair wanted a realignment of the left. The trouble was that the Labour Party did too well in 1997 to make it politically feasible for him to do it. That's why he flirted with proportional representation, setting up the commission under Roy Jenkins.

*Nick Clegg was asked in *The Observer* recently about this idea of a realignment on the left. He said in reply: 'It might have been a useful guide in the mid-1990s after eighteen years of Conservative government. I never thought it a useful tool to understand quite how fluid British politics has become, nor do I think it makes political sense after you have a long period of Labour government.' And he added: 'I've never subscribed to that long march theory of history. I think this analysis of British politics that is all about great cohorts of people who always remain the same and are like tribal blocks, that it's all about some great chess game – I just think that's fallen by the wayside.'*

*Do you think the argument of *The Progressive Dilemma* is old hat now, or is there still something in it?*

No, I don't think it's old hat. The truth is that Nick Clegg and I come from quite different points on the ideological spectrum. He comes from a Conservative background, not a Labour background as I do.

I had a curious little email tiff with him not long before the last general election. The first time I saw him in the flesh was at a meeting in central Oxford where he was 'meeting the people'. I was quite impressed – not enormously, but quite. I sent him an email saying that if you want people like me to vote for your party – people who come from a Labour background – you are not going to do it by attacking the Labour Party in the completely negative way that you do, and particularly not by attacking the authoritarianism that you say has always been central to the Labour tradition. My father was a minister in the Attlee government and he was no authoritarian. Nor was Attlee. You are distorting the history of the Labour Party and you are making it very difficult for people who still identify with it in certain respects to support you. What you ought to do is to adopt a tone of 'more in

Features liberals and social democrats

sorrow than in anger', and say that it is a tragedy that the Blair/Brown regime has betrayed the libertarian elements in the Labour Party's own traditions. That's the way to get Labour people to support you. Well, he wrote back – I didn't expect him to reply – and said that he was so angry with the way the Labour Party had behaved that he couldn't restrain himself from saying so (or words to that effect).

But I now realise that is nothing like the whole story. What has happened is that the economic liberals of the old Liberal Party – its right-wingers, if you like – have been reborn, and have managed to hijack the Liberal Democrat Party. There was always a Liberal right, but people like me blinded ourselves to it because we couldn't bear to acknowledge its existence. We forgot, for example, that there had been an electoral pact between the Liberal Party and the Conservatives in two constituencies in the early 1950s. But for that there would have been only three Liberal MPs instead of five.

I'm not saying the Liberal Democrats are all 'yellow Tories' – the line taken by John Prescott and people like him. I think that's stupid as well as mean-minded. However, I also think that we social democrats ignored the *Orange Book* strand of the Liberal Party. At the moment I suspect that, if there were an election tomorrow, I would vote Green. Old friends, to whom I've shyly confessed my heresy, have berated me for stupidity and irresponsibility. But why not? They're the only party that speaks to me at the moment, although they don't entirely speak for me by any means.

The way I see the present situation is this. People who believe in political pluralism and electoral reform must accept the corollary of coalition politics. That means accepting all the procedures that this present coalition went through before it came into being. Coalition partners should negotiate, and agree on a position that results from fairly tough negotiations and that then becomes the programme for government. And the process should be as transparent as possible, so that the general public know what both parties of the coalition have signed up to. This is much more democratic than what happens with single party governments, returned on manifestos that nobody has ever read and which they don't, in fact, stick to. So I applaud the procedures that produced the current coalition.

I also applaud its decision to halt the growth of the so-called database state, exemplified above all by its decision to junk ID cards. In truth, the coalition is behaving in a far more open and transparent way than did New Labour in the later years of Blair's regime. Good on them! The tragedy is that, on the fundamental, really crucial issue – namely the economy and the deficit – they are simply wrong, disastrously, catastrophically wrong. And they are not just wrong. They have betrayed the promises they made in their election campaign. What's happened to the proposal not to renew Trident as a contribution to cutting public expenditure? That's gone by the board. That was the most distinctive Liberal Democrat policy. They wouldn't have got it from the Tories, of course. They might not have got it from Labour either, but they would have been more likely to get it from Labour.

And yes, the alternative vote is fine. It's undoubtedly better than what we have now. By the same token, a referendum on the alternative vote is fine too. But it's not enough, not nearly enough. They might have secured AV-plus from the Labour Party. My conclusion is that the Liberal Democrats' leaders never wanted a coalition with the Labour Party. That is the only rational interpretation of their conduct. They wanted to get into bed with the Conservatives and they did not want to get into bed with Labour. Their belated negotiations with Labour were a smokescreen for their real intentions.

There is a lot wrong with the Labour Party, of course. It is tribalist, more tribalist than

RENEWAL Vol 18 No. 3/4

the Cameron Conservatives. It clings to a patronising and out-dated self-image, according to which the Labour Party, and only the Labour Party, is the true party of the left and the true party of the people. There are other, pesky little parties that Labour can tolerate; and these may be allowed to clamber aboard the Labour ship if Labour needs them. But their duty is to support Labour, the true, serious party of the left. This mind-set is extremely offensive as well as intellectually contemptible.

I agree with Clegg when he says that we shouldn't think in terms of solid electoral blocs. That's absolutely true, but if you read *The Progressive Dilemma* you'll see that's exactly what I say there. I was talking about a realignment that would include all kinds of groups, not just political parties, or electoral blocs. Actually, that was one of the great discoveries of the SDP; David Owen always used to say that too. He was a tiresome fellow in lots of ways but I now think he was the most far-sighted of the Gang of Four. Be that as it may, I totally agree that we must stop thinking in terms of blocs of voters. But it doesn't follow that there are no political traditions, embodied, at least to some degree, in political parties. And Clegg has ignored that obvious truth.

In the light of what you say about the Orange Book Liberals, do you think that in retrospect your desire to critique the limits of the Labour Party's political culture led you to romanticise the Liberal Party?

There's something in that, but I would put it differently. We social democrats did romanticise the Liberal Party, as you put it, but the explanation lies in the astonishingly bitter nature of the SDP debate on merger with the Liberals after the 1987 election, which led to the creation of the present-day Liberal Democrats. Nobody emerges from that debate with any credit. David Owen, the chief opponent of merger, certainly doesn't. But nor does Roy Jenkins, the chief proponent of merger, and nor do the rest of the pro-merger camp, including me. None of us can look back on the debate with any pleasure or pride. And one of the consequences was that the pro-merger camp idealised the Liberal Party – just as the anti-mergerites demonised it.

Looking back, however, I now see that, on one crucial point, Owen was right. He warned consistently that merger would amount, in practice, to a Liberal takeover. And so it proved. Indeed, that was part of the reason why I left the Liberal Democrats after the 1992 election. Instead of applauding Kinnock for leading Labour back into the mainstream of European social democracy, they stuck to the old Liberal posture of 'a plague on both your houses'.

The flip-side of this point about the romanticisation of the Liberal Party would be the positive case for the Labour Party as the predominant party of the left in British politics. Isn't there an argument that, in the absence of the Labour Party, the British political system would have looked something like the USA or Canada, where you have a politics dominated by social elites and with very little representation within the political system of ordinary people and their interests?

There is some truth in that, but there is also a much larger element of what might be called counter-romanticism. The Labour Party has never been the party of the working class; it has been a party of a section of the working class. In 1987 the Conservatives got more working-class votes in the south of England than Labour did.

As for America, let me tell you a story. When I read Tony Crosland's *The Future of*

Features liberals and social democrats

Socialism in the summer after taking my Finals I was rather shocked by his paeans of praise for American society and culture. But when I went to California as a graduate student a year later I saw that he was right. The US was a much more classless society than Britain. It was more socially egalitarian, though not in terms of income. And the Democratic Party was an analogue of the British Labour Party. The same sort of people belonged to it, and it too had strong ties with the unions. (Remember that this was the heyday of 'Fordism' and that, in some places anyhow, the unions were very powerful).

I was amazed and fascinated by a particular example of the Democrat-trade union link that occurred while I was at Berkeley, in the autumn of 1958. The state constitution provided for referendums on legislative 'propositions' put forward by groups of citizens. In 1958, the employers put a proposition to ban the closed shop (which was legal in California) on the ballot paper. The unions countered with a proposition to change the tax system in a way that would have penalised rich corporations. They did this to siphon off some of the money that would otherwise have been spent on the closed shop referendum and to divert it into the tax change one. It worked! When I arrived in San Francisco the entire city was blanketed with enormous posters saying: 'Defeat the monkey-wrench tax law'. ('Monkey-wrench' is, of course, American for spanner). The employers did defeat the monkey-wrench tax (which the unions didn't really care about) and they lost on the closed shop, about which the unions cared desperately. And in all this, the unions and the Democratic Party were hand in glove.

What has this to do with your question? Simply this. My California experiences taught me three things. First, American society was more open, less hierarchical and more egalitarian than Britain. Second, the American Democratic Party was remarkably close in atmosphere and make-up to the British Labour Party. And thirdly, the American trade unions were closely linked to the Democratic Party. Of course, America has changed a lot since then, and the trade-union voice is much weaker as a result. But exactly the same is true here – despite the existence of the Labour Party. I agree that the voice of the workers ought to be heard in Parliament; that was the original reason for setting up the Labour Party, after all. But the notion that the voice of the workers can be *equated* with the voice of the Labour Party seems to me sentimental rubbish.

Towards a republican social democracy

You already mentioned that in your most recent book, Britain Since 1918, you endorse republicanism as your favoured theory of politics. What do you mean by republicanism and what does it offer that, say, liberalism or socialism doesn't offer?

That's a tough question. I think there are certain philosophical and rhetorical themes in the republican tradition which are very powerful.

One of them is suspicion of arbitrary power. Quentin Skinner makes this point very strongly; and his writings have had a great deal of influence on me, particularly his *Liberty before Liberalism*. Skinner says, in effect, that what Isaiah Berlin calls 'negative freedom' is crucial, but that freedom from arbitrary power, from domination, is equally important. That is an immensely fertile notion and of course it doesn't just apply to political power. It applies just as much to economic power. A classic example is the unaccountable power of the banks and hedge funds that procured the crash of 2008-9. So that's one vitally important and highly relevant strand in republicanism.

RENEWAL Vol 18 No. 3/4

The second aspect of the republican tradition which is still hugely relevant to British society here and now is its emphasis on republican self-respect as contrasted with monarchical servility. British political culture is still saturated with servility: look at the Honours Lists, with their Commanderships, Dameships and Orders of a non-existent empire. The themes that crop up in Milton's later prose writings, when he was trying desperately to stop the return of the monarchy, still resonate strongly with me. One of his targets was what he called 'bowing and cringing'. Well, you can find plenty of bowing and cringing in present-day Britain.

A third aspect of republicanism is its emphasis on self-government. G. D. H. Cole's Guild Socialism, the dream of workers' control in industry, and the Cooperative Movement have all been democratic republican in that sense. Central to the republican ideal is the proposition that the people should take control of their own destinies by and through democratic activity. John Stuart Mill is a complex and in some ways ambiguous figure, but his insight that democratic self-government has to be learned, through strenuous activity in what he called 'the business of life', has had a huge impact on me.

Now these historical figures can't tell us what to do now. You can't go to the shelf and say here's Milton, here's Tom Paine, here's John Stuart Mill, here's G. D. H. Cole, here's *The Miners' Next Step*, and they mean we should do this, this and this today. Of course not. Republicanism is not so much a doctrine as a cast of mind. But the insights of the past can still teach us a lot.

You just mentioned the syndicalist classic, The Miners' Next Step. You wouldn't say, for example, that the trade union militancy of the 1970s that turned you off the Labour Party was an example of ordinary people seeking republican control over their lives?

Yes and no. Nothing works out in life in a simple, straightforward way. The story of the trade unions in the 1970s is both very revealing and very sad. There was an element of democratic republicanism in the trade unionism of that period, but there was also an element of manipulation, ballot fixing, intimidation and even mob rule, and there was a very considerable element of self-deception as well.

What really destroyed the unions' claim to represent the working class in the 1970s was their unwillingness to accept that wage inflation was not just damaging economically, but that it was also cruelly unjust: that it hurt the weak and vulnerable for whom they claimed to speak as well as an impersonal abstraction called 'the economy'. An incomes policy could have been a vehicle for a more democratic republican political economy, but the British union movement was so fragmented and rivalrous that again and again they couldn't step up to the plate and deliver one. Was that inevitable? I don't know, but that's the way it worked out.

In the 1970s, when I was a Labour backbencher, the trade unions were behaving in an absolutely dotty way. In my constituency, the first miners' strike – the strike of 1972 – was, in a way, democratic republican. It was a product of a spontaneous revolt at the grass-roots against perceived injustice. I'm not so sure about the 1974 strike. And then in the 1980s we witnessed the extraordinary spectacle of Arthur Scargill refusing to hold a strike ballot because he was afraid he would lose it. The Notts miners who carried on working because their ballot went against a strike were much better democratic republicans than Arthur Scargill.

Moving on from New Labour

This interview is for the issue of Renewal that will be published in the autumn just after the election of a new leader of the Labour Party. What advice would you give to the new leader?

Well, I suppose a short and unfair answer would be to leap off Blackpool Tower while they're having their Conference. There is something quite extraordinary about this leadership election. The only serious candidates are people who started off as bag-carriers for Blair or Brown and then were bumped up to run their policy units and then were bumped up again to be cabinet ministers. Talk about the Labour Party as a vehicle for the workers! I've known David Miliband for a long time and I like him a lot. I don't know Ed as well, but I like him even better from the small amount I've had to do with him.

But I think the Labour Party's problem at the moment is that they are in denial. My son went to the Compass conference on 10 June. Most of the people there, he said, were Labour. And then he said something that I thought was very interesting: in the end, your perception of the election depended to a very large extent on where you were. The Labour people at the Compass conference had mostly been in Labour strongholds. The Labour strongholds held up for the Labour Party and they therefore interpreted the election result as being quite successful, all things considered, for the Labour Party. Labour voters had turned out as they are supposed to do: in spite of everything, Labour had not lost contact with its base. But the Liberal Democrats saw things very differently. They have no base; there is no solid block of Liberal Democrat voters anywhere. And they saw the election from places where the Labour Party on the whole did badly and they themselves did badly too. So these two different groups came out of the election with different experiences and different pictures of its meaning.

The Labour Party will not be ready for government again unless and until it admits that the Blair/Brown regime after 2001 was a disaster. Yes, it did some good things, but the Gini co-efficient that measures income inequality continued to rise. Britain is now more inegalitarian than when New Labour came to power in 1997. It is also one of the least egalitarian countries in Europe. It's true that the Gini coefficient didn't rise nearly as much as it did in the second half of the Thatcher government, but that isn't saying much. And the bubble that burst so disastrously in 2008-9 was to quite a considerable extent the work of Gordon Brown. Who said this at the time? Well, Vince Cable said it. But nobody in the Labour Party put forward a coherent critique of the New Labour economic model. Someone with a first in history from Edinburgh University ought to have known enough about the history of capitalism to know that boom and bust is in its DNA; and that it was ludicrous to imagine that all these whizz-kid mathematical modellers from Harvard had miraculously found a way to enjoy perpetual, never-ending economic growth.

So in answer to your question, the new leader needs to take the Party off to some sort of desert island somewhere, to brainstorm and repent – I mean that in a most serious way. They've got to decide what went wrong, instead of taking refuge in the excuse that people voted against the Labour Party because they associated it with the recession. The fact is that Labour didn't do very well in 2005, when the Conservatives were still unelectable because Michael Howard, their leader, was still a straight down the line Thatcherite. The moment Cameron came in and started to go back to a Whiggish kind of Toryism the Tories became electable. Labour's refusal to acknowledge this is gross self-deception. It bene-

RENEWAL Vol 18 No. 3/4

fited from the fact that in three consecutive general elections the Conservative Party was unelectable. Then that ceased to be true; and now the Conservatives have won. It's not some extraordinary freak of nature. It would have been a freak of nature for Labour to win, given its record.

So they have to decide what went wrong. And that needs to be done in a very honest, soul-searching, serious way. Then they have to explain what they now want to do having learned the bitter lessons of 2001 to 2010. It will be a very painful process. The easy thing to do is just to batter away attacking the Coalition's cuts and hoping for the best on the grounds that by the time the next election comes the electorate will be so fed up with the coalition that they will turn to Labour as the only possible alternative. That isn't enough, in my opinion.

There's a curious historical irony about a former SDPer like you crying betrayal about a right-wing Labour government going out of office.

I see no irony. We SDPers left the Labour Party partly because it was lurching to the left but also because we could not stomach the complacent, backward-looking, intellectually barren Callaghan-Hattersley right. We belonged to a very different Labour right: to the right typified by Tony Crosland and Roy Jenkins, and still more by Shirley Williams.

When Blair came on the scene, some of us (not all, but some) thought 'God, finally he's going to do it'. Then the bopper went off into the blue yonder, and we were left saying: 'that's not what we meant!' Here is the real irony. An Oxford friend of mine, who belongs to the local Labour Party, talks in exactly the old language that Labour right-wingers used in the 1970s: 'We've got to stand up to the lunatics on the left'. Yet the fact is, the lunatics on the left may now be right. That is what is so odd.

I think Blair came close to destroying the Labour Party. He didn't of course, but I think in a way there's a parallel to the Tories under Thatcher. It took a long, long time for the Conservatives to get out from under her baleful shadow. The Blair position in relation to the Labour Party is not precisely the same as hers in relation to the Conservative Party. Thatcher had an agenda which she passionately believed in and which she pushed through. Blair didn't. That's an important difference. What does Blairism really amount to, apart from a strange mixture of Manichaeism and messianism? But in some ways that makes it more difficult to come out from under him. In the Conservative case there was something solid to come out from. In the present-day Labour Party there isn't. That doesn't mean, I hasten to add, that they are bound to lose the next election.

This takes me back to my central critique of the Coalition. It is doing lots of splendid things in many ways. In many, many ways it is a better government than the Labour government. The only problem is that it is economically illiterate. And tragically, this is not true of Britain alone. Right across Europe, economic illiteracy reigns. The only Keynesian regime in the developed world is that of the United States. Which is further to the left now, Britain or the United States? And which was further to the left, pre-2010? Obama's Democrats or Brown's Labour Party? I don't think there's a contest.

Strangely, thinking back to the factional fights of the 1970s and 1980s, perhaps one figure I, and people like me, did underestimate was Tony Benn. When I was working on my last book, *Britain Since 1918*, I went back and read some of Benn's stuff – I say this in the book – and he was not so wrong at the start of the decade. He did see that something had gone seriously wrong between 1964 and 1970, in a way that none of the other Cabinet

Features liberals and social democrats

ministers under Wilson did. He put forward a rather wild but very interesting manifesto for a new politics. In my terms it was democratic republican, and there were some very good things in it. Some of it reads rather oddly, I admit. He said we needed leaders in the 'Moses tradition' which presumably meant leaders like him, and unlike the patently un-Mosaic Harold Wilson.

But the real point of Benn's complicated trajectory after 1970 is that it was a kind of tragedy. Benn threw his pebble into the pool and the ripples went ever wider. He got ecstatic support from outside parliament, and it went to his head. There is often a sort of symbiotic relationship between a charismatic political leader and his or her audience – a relationship which is very hard to analyse. In Benn's case, he became a heroic figure to the left and, above all, to the extra-parliamentary left. He was carried away by the experience. He tried to do to the Labour Party what Enoch Powell was trying to do to the Conservative Party – namely to use his extra-parliamentary following as a battering ram to destroy the internal parliamentary leadership. He surrounded himself with very foolish advisers to whom he paid too much attention, essentially because they were there, and looked up to him. By, say, 1980, the forward-looking, interesting new thinker, Benn, had been completely overwhelmed by Benn, the bizarre kind of populist quasi-Marxist whose nostrums didn't make sense. That was a tragedy, not just for Benn but for the British left.

He was there quite early on the constitutional reform agenda.

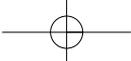
Yes he was, for example his own personal campaign to get rid of the hereditary peerage, which did change the constitution, and in his support for the referendum too. Roy Jenkins resigned from the front bench in opposition to the referendum and now it's part of the constitution, here to stay without a doubt. We shall almost certainly have one on AV.

How do you think the left should approach any Coalition-sponsored referendum on AV?

The political dynamics of the referendum will be very interesting. Cameron is bound to campaign for the status quo. You cannot have a referendum on a big constitutional change in which the Prime Minister of the country says nothing. Wilson just about managed to do that in the Europe referendum in 1975, but that was a very different animal. The debate really did cross party lines; and Wilson could and did leave it to Heath and Jenkins to lead the 'Yes' campaign. And anyway at the very end he came off the fence. I don't think Cameron could get away with that. So we'll have the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister on different sides in this campaign and a lot will depend on who wins. I don't know how much they've thought about this but you can see obvious fissures emerging.

Looming over the Liberal Democrats are the twin spectres of liberal unionism and national liberalism. The more successful the coalition is at hanging together, the less reason there is to vote Liberal Democrat at the next election. If the referendum fails, it might be very hard to keep the Liberal Democrats in the coalition.

I'm sure there will be an active debate during the referendum campaign. All sorts of people will get involved; there may well be rival umbrella organisations as there were in the 1970s. It seems pretty clear that sections of the Labour Party will be campaigning for a 'no' vote alongside most of the Conservative Party. It is impossible to predict how things



RENEWAL Vol 18 No. 3/4

will turn out. But one thing seems clear. A defeat for AV would set back the cause of electoral reform for a very long time. For the democratic republican left that would be a tragedy.

