

# Tony Benn and the Five Essential Questions of Democracy

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Tony Benn met Mahatma Gandhi when he was 12, knew and defended Nelson Mandela when that embrace of the anti-apartheid struggle was seen as a radical act, began his 50 years of service in the British Parliament when Winston Churchill was the leader of the conservative opposition and left after Tony Blair became prime minister, renounced his inherited title as the 2nd Viscount Stansgate so that he could serve in the people's representative (declaring "I am not a reluctant peer but a persistent commoner"), ushered in a new age of popular communications and connectivity as Britain's pioneering Minister of Technology in the 1960s and 1970s, championed cooperatives and worker ownership as Britain's Minister of Industry in the 1970s, battled not just Margaret Thatcher but the compromising leaders of his own Labour Party on behalf of the working class in the 1980s and finished his almost 60 years of public life as an international leader of the opposition to the wars of whim and folly that have stolen so much of the promise of our time.

Benn was [a proud radical](#), an anti-colonialist, a socialist without apology and the inspiration for generations of activists, organizers, parliamentarians, presidents and prime ministers around the world -- including the current leader of the Labour Party, [Ed Miliband](#), who responded to [Benn's death Friday at age 88](#) with mourning for the loss of an "iconic figure of our age."

Yet, across the quarter century that I knew him, Benn identified most proudly as [a small "d" democrat](#), a tireless champion of a power-to-the-people ethic that placed its faith in the great mass of humanity rather than billionaires, media moguls and political powerbrokers.

The last time that Tony and I appeared together at a public event – a symposium in London put on by Britain's brilliant [Campaign for Press and Broadcast Freedom](#) that recalled his famous [declaration that](#) "broadcasting is really too important to be left to the broadcasters" – he reminded me of his belief that those in positions of economic, social and political power should always be asked five questions:

"What power have you got?"

"Where did you get it from?"

"In whose interests do you use it?"

"To whom are you accountable?"

"How do we get rid of you?"

Benn asked these questions everywhere he went. I saw him write them on the chalkboards of

classrooms and lecture halls. I heard him repeat them at rallies and protests and marches.

I think his favorite of the questions – as a political figure who delighted the give and take of campaigning, the debates, the canvasses, the counts, especially in [the historic mining constituency of Chesterfield](#) that he represented in the final decades of his remarkable career – was: “How do we get rid of you?”

“Anyone who cannot answer the last of those questions does not live in a democratic system,” Benn explained.

“Only democracy gives us that right. That is why no one with power likes democracy,” he would continue. “And that is why every generation must struggle to win it and keep it – including you and me, here and now”

In fairness, it was not quite true that “no one with power likes democracy.”

Benn held power, as a revered parliamentarian, a minister of state, a competitor for the leadership of his party and a figure of international prominence who traveled in the circles of heads of state. Yet, he was happiest when he was in the street, marching, speaking truth to power, challenging prime ministers and presidents.

To Tony’s view, citizens could not be spectators.

This is why he [championed media reform and political reform](#), embracing structural changes that would take power away from unelected billionaires and their political pawns and give it to the people. The great historical struggle, he argued, was always over the scope and character of democracy.

When I was with Tony in Chesterfield and London and too many other locations to count over the decades of our friendship, we always spoke of Tom Paine, the English radical who inspired an American revolution. Tony was passionate about Paine and about all the other dissenters, be they British or American or Indian or South African, the suffragists and civil-rights marchers, the anti-colonialists and anti-apartheid campaigners, who suffered and struggled and persevered in the cause of democracy.

“A historical perspective is the key to democratic politics, which if denied can bury the real issues and confine news coverage to high-level gossip about the rich and the powerful, reducing us to the role of spectators of our fate, rather than active participants,” [he explained](#). “The obliteration of the past strengthens the short-term calculations that pass for political thought, and for me the real heroes are those few who try to explain the world in order to help us to understand what we can best do to improve our lot.”

Tony Benn explained the world, better than anyone I knew. And he was never, ever willing to accept the role of spectator in the great democratic debate, and the great democratic life, that he sought. We honor him best by asking his questions, and by recognizing that every generation must struggle to win

democracy and to keep it.