




"Six of the best!" bellowed Sir Knigel the knight-driver, as he knipped off on his knight-mare to knobble a knasty knight-knapper who had knutted a knother knight. "The knerve of the knave," he thundered, "but I know how to knab him. Give my knimble knag a knice knoggin of Super Shell, and I'll have his knauseating knees knocking before the knight's out."

Knight or Knoon... **Super SHELL**

you can be S for SURE of it 

"NOTHING," SAID MR. MACMILLAN in his tribute to Aneurin Bevan in the House of Commons, "was more striking than the surge of sympathy at the time of his grave illness some months ago. This feeling was spontaneous, and it was shared by men and women of every class and every party, including those whom he had in the past attacked most fiercely." He went on to wonder why "a man who had, all through his life, been a somewhat controversial figure should have ended by commanding such general admiration and affection."

That Bevan was admired and loved by his friends, and admired and held in quite uncommon affection by those who were only occasionally in his company, is, indeed, not wonderful. He was, we are told, a choice friend; he was certainly a choice companion. But that this admiration and affection should have extended even to those who had never known him and perhaps had never heard him speak is remarkable. The feeling of almost irreparable loss manifested after his death was national as well as spontaneous. The *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Worker* were the only two national newspapers that did not publish leading articles mourning his death; those which did were not ashamed to be frankly emotional. Even *The Economist* concluded a rather cold salute by saying that between the poet, Aneurin Bevan, and the pragmatist, Mr. Gaitskell, it is the poet who "somehow at his death leaves the greatest holes in our hearts." Whatever else it may be—and to dismiss a politician as a poet is probably intended as a slight by *The Economist*—this is not the language of a formal or hypocritical obituary.

Bevan was a man of size; and size in a man is a quality readily recognized and respected, even when it arouses hostility. "Whenever a man of size dies," wrote the political correspondent of *The Observer*, "one gets the impression that the stage is frighteningly empty and silent." But a second fear was apparent at the time of Bevan's death, and it crept into a majority of the comments: the fear that as a nation we are no longer able to produce politicians of his size and capacity. In more tributes than one expected, his name was unself-consciously associated with that of Sir Winston Churchill, as if their removal from active poli-

Aneurin Bevan

and the Art of Politics

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By

HENRY FAIRLIE

tical life had abruptly brought a line to an end. Whether they remarked his passion or his breadth of mind, his eloquence or the colour of his personality, the writers of these tributes seemed to be lamenting the passing, not of one man only, but of a particular form of greatness.

Unlike most politicians—and it was this that distinguished him from most of his contemporaries—Bevan never gave the impression of looking over his shoulder before he spoke, to see if public or party opinion were with him. "If he felt a thing deeply," commented Mr. Macmillan, "he said so, and in no uncertain terms." This may sometimes have incurred him the hostility of large sections of the public, and the displeasure of a large section of his party; it on occasion made him the despair even of his most devoted followers. But, in the end, they could only respect him for it.



"Daily Herald" copyright photograph

Trafalgar Square, 1936: BEVAN addresses a demonstration of Means Test marchers. "He firmly believed that a socialist Britain would be a greater Britain; and it was a greater Britain that he wanted to see"

They were right to do so. Bevan lived in an age when the party machines were growing steadily in power; but he owed nothing to the machine. During the thirty years that he was in the House of Commons, the discipline of the parties was more and more strictly enforced; but he defied that discipline and spoke as a man who was accountable to only one body, his constituents. By the end of his life, psephologists were busily and plausibly setting out what was politically possible, and sociologists or economists what was politically appropriate; but Bevan trusted always to his own judgment and set against their tidy and academic arguments his own considerable political philosophy. Above all, in an age when, so we are told, public opinion polls were quoted even in cabinets, and market research organizations were employed to discover the true feelings of the people, he

trusted to his own estimate of the British people and his own assumptions about their character, their aspirations and their capacity.

He might be wrong, but this mattered little. It was his example that, in the end, told: the example of a man who, at a time when politics was passing increasingly into the hands of professional experts and confidence men, heeded none of them and sought, instead, to perform to the best of his ability what is still alleged to be the true function of a British member of Parliament—that of speaking his mind openly, and according to his own unimpeded judgment, on the great questions of the day.

This was more than a question of his character, of a ruling spirit. What Bevan strove to do was maintain, even reassert, the predominance of politics over all its spurious rivals—sociology, economics and, most dangerous of

all today, mass psychology. "Politics is an art," he wrote, in his ill-shapen but illuminating book of rumination, *In Place of Fear*,

"not a science. By the study of anthropology, sociology, psychology and such elements of social and political economy as are relevant, we try to work out correct principles to guide us in our approach to the social problems of the time. Nevertheless, the application of those principles to a given situation is an art."

There is nothing very new or original in this statement; but it lay at the heart of all that Bevan tried to do. He sought to restore politics. Politics is not analysis, but synthesis. Politics does not know the method of partitioning life or dissecting man; it certainly does not know such a being as "economic man." Whatever help may be had from the sciences, the art of politics is to form a total judgment of a whole people at a given moment, of their situation, their hopes and their capabilities, and then to provide the leadership which will make it possible for these to be realized. Politics, and this is perhaps most important of all, acknowledges the power of ideas, especially their power to cross all the boundaries that the sciences employ to divide men into convenient groups and categories. Politics dies once it is assumed that ideas cannot, in the end, move men more powerfully than interest or skilled manipulation.

By these standards, Bevan was a very great politician. Although he could sometimes be tawdry, sometimes malevolent, could certainly reduce his own size, it was his habit to elevate political discussion. He never, so far as I can recall, appealed either openly or slyly to men's stomachs; he appealed, instead, where it was in his capacity to do so, to their minds and their hearts, and usually left them less complacent than they had been. I know of no politician of his generation who was by nature so inclined to treat the British people as adults; and, when he descended to childishness, which like all great men he sometimes did, the contrast was striking and, to his admirers, painful.

But it was not only in a certain elevation of mind and of character that he brought to politics that people recognized his size. He was also moved—and the words are used with care—by a peculiar elevated patriotism. Bevan so frequently criticized the policies of his own country, even in war-time, that his patriotism



Photo: Keystone

Just after he had resigned from the Ministry of Labour, April 23rd, 1951

was not always obvious. But his patriotism itself was not of an immediately obvious kind. The comparison with Fox has been made many times; and it is worth recalling the words in which Christopher Hobbhouse discusses the nature of Fox's pacifism during the Napoleonic wars:

"The fear of misrepresentation scarcely entered his head. His love for England was so obvious—it breathed in every word he said or wrote—that it was inconceivable to him that cheap taunts against his patriotism could be believed. Pacifism is a development of patriotism. You must see the fine points in your own country before you can see the fine points in civilization: you cannot love war and England. When the Tory press laughed at Fox for wishing well to every country but his own, the accusations fell dead, infinitely wide of the mark. It was because he loved England too well that he over-rated her immunity, and put an exaggerated value on her freedom of speech and thought. He could not rouse himself to the danger that threatened institutions he thought immovable, so deeply rooted in the minds of a phlegmatic race. In a brilliant simile, he accused Burke of loving the constitution as Regan and Goneril loved their father, with extravagant protestations of devotion: for himself, he said with Cordelia, I love it as I ought. That Burke carried his trepidation too far cannot be denied: Fox carried his confidence to the opposite extreme. Yet it was a confidence born of unshakable faith in the excellence of English institutions and in the sound determination of the English people to preserve them."

When allowances have been made for the precise difference between the two men, and between the ages in which they lived, this judgment of Fox's patriotism remains a remarkably accurate and instructive comment on Bevan's own love for his country.

There was a sense in which he loved Britain too well, this man whom the jingoists despised. So confident was he of Britain's real greatness, that he was frequently in danger of underestimating the precariousness both of her position and of her institutions. I heard many of his more important speeches; and the lasting impression which they have left is that, in all of them, he addressed his fellow-countrymen and very rarely anyone else. In addressing them, he seemed to speak from three unchangeable assumptions: first, that the British people were open to a just appeal; secondly, that they would eventually respond to it, so long as British institutions continued to safeguard freedom of speech and thought, and thus enabled the

appeal to be made; and, thirdly, that the British people, answering such an appeal, were the sanest and the most enlightened leaders the world could wish for. There was no abandonment of principle, no reversal of earlier views, in his plea that Britain should not go "naked into the conference chamber." That was the logical conclusion, however agonizing it may have been for him to recognize it, of a man who, throughout his life, pitched his claim to British leadership in the world higher than anyone else except Sir Winston Churchill. In the end, he was forced to acknowledge that the exercise of moral leadership involved the exercise of power.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, no one was less of an "internationalist" than he, certainly in the Labour Party. In *In Place of Fear*, he wrote:

"International organizations are continually passing the most idealistic resolutions, that remain in the air because the statesmen subscribing to them are without the economic power to carry them out. . . . This is not an argument against international co-operation. On the contrary, one of the main themes of this book is a plea for more and more international co-operation. But this would be given greater reality in action, if the governments of the world could speak with authority for the economic behaviour of their own peoples."

It is not only the accents of these sentences—the almost contemptuous reference, for example, to the idealistic resolutions of international bodies—that are remarkable. What is equally remarkable is that, mixed with the socialism, there is an instinctive urge to look to the power and influence of his own country as the source of power and influence in the world. "If you are going to plan the world," he wrote in the same chapter, "you must first of all control the part of it you want to fit into the whole." Again, there is more than socialism in this; there is the much wider assumption that a politician must act through the strength and will of his own countrymen. On the first page of *In Place of Fear*, he said that his interest in politics began when he asked himself "the one practical question, where does power lie in this particular state of Great Britain, and how can it be attained by the workers?" It is hard to think of any other socialist politician of his generation who would have framed the question in quite that way, would have given quite that emphasis to

the particular country in which power was to be sought and from which it was to be exercised.

Britain was always at the centre of Bevan's world, in a way that forcibly recalls that he was born in the year of Queen Victoria's golden jubilee. However great the importance that he attached to other parts of the world than Europe, his maps were still drawn on Mercator's projection, and Britain was still the small island in the centre, from which dotted lines radiated to five continents. The fact that, in Bevan's mind, the dotted lines represented routes along which a commerce in ideas, instead of in goods and services, was conducted does not alter the central position that he gave to Britain. The almost insolent mockery with which he sometimes addressed his Chinese or Russian hosts was born of a deep-seated conviction of Britain's right to lead and to teach, and an almost equally deep-seated incomprehension that this right should be challenged by nations that had not enjoyed the persuasive instruction given by long experience of free institutions. More than anyone else of his generation, he arrogantly proposed to the most powerful nations of the world that they should be ready to learn from Britain. No Whig could have spoken with a more unconscious assumption of superiority.

The change in the public's attitude to Bevan did not begin with his illness. It began with his speeches at the time of the Suez adventure. It was then that the Conservative benches first began to talk of him as a statesman, and to contrast him favourably with Mr. Gaitskell. Even the suburbs, which had most bitterly resented his quip about Tory "vermin," at last forgot it, and started to nod their heads in appreciation of his size and his honesty. Yet no one on the Labour benches belaboured the Government more unmercifully than Bevan throughout the Suez episode. Why he got a fair hearing for the first time in his life was that never once did he seem to be appealing over the heads of his fellow-countrymen to the United Nations, to world opinion or even to American opinion. Indeed, his speeches on Suez remained as uncompromisingly critical of American pretensions as they had ever been; and the fear of losing American goodwill was never prominent in his argument. This was very different from



Photo: Planet News

In Brighton for the Labour Party Conference, September 1957: "Bevan was a man of size; and size is a quality . . . easily recognized and respected, even when it arouses hostility"

the attitude of most other opponents of the Suez campaign, who seemed always to be being pulled along by the strings by which they had tied themselves to outside opinion.

Bevan did not then, or at any other time, sanctimoniously condemn his own country, or ever find it necessary to pretend that the opposition of other countries to Britain's actions was founded on stern moral principles. He was never one for being taken in by hypocrisy—not even, for any length of time, by his own. He simply appealed over the heads of the existing Government to his fellow-countrymen, and asked them whether they were content to be led into an adventure for which neither the Government nor they seemed to have the stomach. The horror that he expressed was not primarily at Britain's wrongdoing, but at the unnecessary belittlement of Britain. He spoke with the inflection of the great radical patriots whom Britain has usually found when she has needed them, and who have always poured

their scorn as much on the absurdity, as on the immorality, of costly military adventures. Even in a just and necessary combat, there is always something rather ridiculous about the way in which the British military machine lumbers into action: we have, thank heaven, never wholly rid ourselves of the habits of a militia led into battle by a squire. In small, ill-judged military episodes, the British military machine clanks even more awkwardly; and on these occasions the British radical has always found a target, which the British people, stuffed with prejudices against a standing army, are content that he should shoot at. The invective Bevan poured on the sheer inefficiency of the Suez campaign was in that great tradition; it was patriotic as well as radical.

There was much of this same patriotism in his socialism. He thought, spoke and wrote much about power, and retained to the end of his life what I believe to be the fundamental

naïveté of socialism: the belief that, in a free society, the distribution of economic power can be greatly altered by acts of Parliament. But I do not think that it was this obsession with economic power that was at the root of his socialism. His true conviction was that Britain had a destiny to fulfil, and that she could fulfil it only if she was made a cleaner, more humane, wiser and juster polity. To him, this meant socialism. One may go even further without fear of contradiction: he firmly believed that a socialist Britain would be a greater Britain; and it was a greater Britain that he wanted to see. Those who attended his memorial service at Westminster Abbey felt, without any sentimentality, a thrill of appropriateness as they sang the famous lines:

"I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant Land."

It is a figure of considerable size about whom these words may be sung without any sense of impropriety.

Bevan's socialism had about it such a crusading spirit that people are apt to say that he was the last of the generation that brought the Labour Party to power, that with him the socialism of protest has died. This is to misunderstand what was Bevan's real contribution to socialism in this country, and, indeed, to its politics. Once again, it is in his own words that one may find his contribution most accurately defined.

"Democratic socialism (he wrote) is a child of modern society and so of relativist philosophy. It seeks the truth in any given situation, knowing all the time that if this is pushed too far it will fall into error. It struggles against the evils that flow from private property, yet realizes that all forms of private property are not necessarily evil. Its chief enemy is vacillation, for it must achieve passion in action, in the pursuit of qualified judgments. It must know how to enjoy the struggle, whilst recognizing that progress is not the elimination of struggle but rather a change in its terms."

To "achieve passion in action, in the pursuit of qualified judgments," is a challenge not only to democratic socialism but to democracy itself. Without this passion, the free societies of the West are liable to fall into an effete liberalism, the effete liberalism of Mr. E. M. Forster's

"Two Cheers for Democracy." Without this passion, they are likely to lose the conviction and the spirit with which to confront the dictatorships of the East. Yet to achieve this passion in the pursuit of qualified judgments is possibly the most difficult task that can be asked of men. Men will readily exert themselves, sacrifice themselves, even die, for dogma and prejudice. To arouse in them the same strenuous spirit in defence of the tender qualifications of a free society is almost impossible.

It was to this task that Bevan dedicated his life; and there are few phrases—certainly none coined by any of his contemporaries—that show such an understanding of the problem as the passage which I have just quoted. They breathe the spirit of a free society in every syllable; and when, from a distance, history eventually comes to assess Bevan's speeches and actions, it will find that, in both, the striving for passion in pursuit of qualified judgments was the rule that regulated his political behaviour. Only if this is understood is it possible to understand a political career that otherwise seems to lack both sense and direction.

It is not interesting here to examine in detail the faults of temperament that deprived Bevan of the ultimate influence that ought to have been his. They were large; and one can scarcely blame the solid and methodical members of a party for shuddering at the prospect of being led by a man whose temper, in moments of crisis, was unpredictable. He so frequently threw away positions of advantage. One may recall how, in one meeting of the Parliamentary Party, he was interrupted by a harmless and elderly woman member. Bevan, instead of ignoring the intervention, turned on her in a rage and cried: "If the Parliamentary Party is to be composed of people like you, we may as well pack up and go home." From that moment his case was lost. Again, no one who witnessed it will ever forget the occasion when he strode to the despatch box, after Sir Anthony Eden had announced the formation of SEATO, and repudiated his own leader in terms that even someone of Lord Attlee's mildness could not ignore. His friends, one remembers, hid their heads in their hands as they saw Bevan striding, purple in the face, from the far end of the front bench. Within a matter of hours he had to

resign from the Shadow Cabinet to which he had only so recently been re-admitted. However invaluable such a man may be, no party can entrust him with the leadership.

Yet the words of Hobhouse on Fox remain: "the worst of leaders was still the best of friends." Neither the Labour Party, nor British politics, nor the free societies of the West will regain their firmness of purpose until they have learned to speak again with the confidence and passion of Aneurin Bevan. "If I have not acted much," Fox said at the end of his life, "you will allow that I have spoken much and felt more." We shall be unwise if, at a time when the country and the alliance to which it belongs are consumed with doubt and self-questioning, we under-estimate the importance of what Bevan said and what he felt, merely because he held office only for five and three-quarter years in a political career of more than thirty. When he died, it would seem, he was for the first time putting his political ideas into some true perspective, both national and historical. No one knows what he might have achieved if he had still been there for the Labour Party to turn to in its present confusion; what assurance he might belatedly have found in himself, and what reassurance he might have given back to the Labour Party.

He was, in his last years, slowly developing a consistent moral protest which, if he had had the time, might have caught the country. Long before Professor Galbraith, or his imitators at the London School of Economics, popularized the conception of the affluent society, it was Bevan who, in one characteristic stroke of imagination, held it up to scorn. If our society continued along its present lines, he said, we would end up by watching ourselves starve to death on the television. Once heard, the phrase sits uncomfortably in one's mind, an irritant that provokes new ideas and even enables one to see problems in a different conceptual framework. This was Bevan's true genius: he was the perpetual enemy of the complacency that afflicts free and apparently prosperous societies. He was an uncomfortable man to have in the senate; but no senate can properly provide for the future of the society it rules without the candid and fearless advice of men like Aneurin Bevan.

(Below) At the "Tribune" meeting, Scarborough, October 1958

Photo: Associated Press

