



Tony Benn: The legacy of the Levellers

The following are extracts from a speech given by Tony Benn – then minister for energy in Callaghan’s Labour government – on 15 May 1976 at Burford, Oxfordshire. It was here on the night of 14/15 May 1649 that Cromwell’s troops defeated and dispersed a mutinying force of Levellers, part of the New Model Army. Captured Levellers were imprisoned in the church, and eventually three were shot.

We are here today ...

- to honour the memory of Private Church, Corporal Perkins and Cornet Thompson – three English Levellers executed in Burford churchyard in 1649 for their political activities
- to recall the beliefs of the Leveller movement of which they were members;
- to consider the contribution that that movement has made to British democracy and socialism;
- and to discuss together, in the democratic manner of the Levellers themselves, the relevance of their teaching to our society 325 years after their deaths.

The beliefs of the Levellers

The issues raised in the historic conflict between Charles I, resting his claim to govern Britain on the divine right of kings, and Parliament, which represented – albeit imperfectly – a demand for the wider sharing of power, remain alive in British politics to this day because they concern the use and abuse of state power.

The Levellers developed and campaigned – first with Cromwell and then against him – for a political and constitutional settlement of the Civil War which would

embody principles of political freedom that anticipated by a century and a half the main ideas of the American and French revolutions.

They held themselves to be free-born Englishmen, entitled to the protection of a natural law of human rights which they believed to originate in the will of God, rights vested in the people to whom alone true sovereignty belonged.

These sovereign rights, the Levellers held, were only loaned to Parliament, to be elected on a wide popular franchise, who would hold them in trust.

The Levellers also believed passionately in religious toleration and rejected oppression by presbyters as much as by priests, wishing to end the horrific record of executions, burnings, brandings and banishments that Christians had perpetrated on themselves and others, which has led to the martyrdom of thousands of good Catholics and Protestants, dissenters, Jews and Gentiles alike.

The Levellers distilled their political philosophy by discussion out of their own experience, mixing theory and practice, thought and action. By doing so, they passed on to succeeding generations a formula for social progress from which we can learn how to tackle the problems of our time.

The fate of the Levellers?

The ideas of the Levellers were thought to be so dangerous because of their popularity then that, as now, the establishment wanted to silence them.

By 1650, the Levellers' movement had been effectively crushed. Cromwell's Commonwealth represented a formidable advance compared to the reign of King Charles which preceded it. But it did not – and, in terms of its historical and industrial development, probably could not – adopt the principles that Lilburne, Overton, Walwyn, still less Winstanley, were advocating.

Ten years later came the Restoration of Charles II. In 1688, Britain witnessed the shadowy beginnings of a constitutional monarchy which, as it emerged at that time, had practically nothing whatever in common with real political democracy.

But the elimination of the Levellers as an organised political movement could not obliterate the ideas which they had propagated. From that day to this, the same principles of religious and political freedom and equality have reappeared again and again in the history of the Labour movement and throughout the world.

The Levellers' influence today

If the Levellers were here today, they might be surprised to find so much attributed to their movement, which, for them, must have seemed to have ended in abject failure.

Their advocacy of democracy and equality was taken up by generations of liberal and socialist thinkers and activists pressing for reforms, many of which are still strongly contested in our country to this day.

The Levellers would be pleased at such progress as we have made since 1649. But, being analysts of the nature of society, they would also see that much of the power structure within the social and political system has survived unscathed despite the outward appearance of reform.

What would the Levellers say to us if they were here today? I hope this question will start a debate and lead on to a fuller examination of the nature of our present society.

For my part, I think the Levellers would have much to say about the issues which concern us here in England today – and I have selected 10 issues which I believe would concern them.

1 The Levellers would surely concentrate their attention on the huge accumulation of financial power in our society; and the continued exclusion of working people from effective democratic power over it. They would link the present maldistribution of wealth – here and worldwide – to the maldistribution of power. They would champion all those in Britain and throughout the world who experience poverty.

2 The Levellers would view with deep suspicion the power of the military establishments to be found worldwide. These sometimes incorporate political police forces which seem to believe that they have a divine right to secrecy served by a network of spies and agents, using bribery and corruption to serve their purposes without regard to moral principles.

3 The Levellers would immediately see the relevance of industrial democracy – by workers' control or self-management – as a natural extension of the political franchise to replace the power of the new industrial feudalism which has long established itself through the growth of giant companies.

4 The Levellers might see in the immense influence of the educational establishment, under the titular leadership of the universities, a new class of rulers in a self-perpetuating hierarchy, aiming to establish a claim to the 'private ownership of knowledge' which, by rights, is part of 'the common store house' belonging to us all.

5 The Levellers might see in the mass media a modern secular church seeking to control the minds of the people by standard sermons from television pulpits, day after day and night after night, keeping out dissenters or spokesmen for the common people, imposing a technical monopoly censorship that frustrates the right to free speech because it denies the equally important right to be heard.

6 The Levellers would uphold the rights of constituents to recall and replace their parliamentary candidates – on the same basis and for the same reason as dissenting chapels claimed the right to appoint and dismiss their ministers, and because of the inalienable sovereignty of the people which no Parliament has any right to usurp.

I imagine that, for the same reason, they would deeply suspect the law-making powers of the Brussels commissioners who are not accountable to electors with power to remove them.

7 The Levellers, and still more the Diggers, would add a new and moral dimension to the movement for conserving the earth's limited resources by reminding man of his duty to his fellow citizens and his descendants not to squander the earth's 'common treasury' because it is God's gift to each generation in turn – a powerful argument for common ownership and a classless society.

8 The Levellers would demand a far greater public accountability by all those who exercise centralised civil, political, scientific, technical, educational and mass media power through the great bureaucracies of the world, and would call for the democratic control of it all.

9 The Levellers would warn against looking for deliverance to any elite group, whatever its origins, even if it came from the Labour movement, who might claim some special ability to carry through reforms by proxy, free from the discipline of recall or re-election. They would argue that all real reform comes from below, and that the self-confidence of the common people in organ-

ising for themselves – in their unions, trades, crafts, local communities and civil and human rights groups, enlarging their own horizons by their own efforts, distilling their own wisdom from their own experience, and breeding their own collective leadership in the process – offers the only real guarantee of advance.

10 The Levellers would argue passionately for free speech and make common cause, worldwide, with those who fight for human rights against tyrants and dictators of all political colours, not sparing Stalinists who falsely seek to justify uniformity as a necessary defence for socialism.

To sum up ...

To summarise all those lessons, the one connecting thread that united the Levellers to each other, and unites us to them, is a passion for democracy advocated for moral and practical reasons, both because it

recognises the rights of man, and because democracy imposes responsibilities in those who exercise those rights.

Oliver Cromwell's place in English history is secure, but the ideas of the Levellers which he tried to crush when he was moving to establish the Commonwealth have, in the event, shown greater durability than the institutional changes that he carried through in his short reign as Lord Protector.

And so it will always be. For politics is really about education and not about propaganda. It is about teaching more than management. It is about ideas and values and not only about Acts of Parliament, political institutions and ministerial office. The Levellers, thank God, have at least taught us all that.

It is no wonder that so many people wielding power still feel threatened by what they stood for. And it is no wonder that others are still inspired by their teaching and wish to honour their memory.