

# BRAVO BENN?

Robert Jenkins, *Tony Benn: A Political Biography*, Writers and Readers Publishing Co-operative, £6.95, 293 pages.

*"I am an unrepentant believer in free enterprise. I have failed to discover, in a long and diligent search, any material benefit which has ever reached mankind except through the agony of individual enterprise. I therefore regard the whole movement for creating wealth through political agencies as a snare and a delusion"*

— Ernest John Pickston Benn, 1925

**A**NTHONY Wedgwood Benn is a radical non-conformist politician, now ex-minister of a former Labour Government. His biographer, Robert Jenkins, is a Conservative Catholic accountant, a merchant banker and supporter, presumably, of the present British Government.

If the precept that opposites attract has any value, the opposition of subject and biographer would seem to be confirmed in the present volume. This is a fascinating and carefully researched analysis of the political foundation of the Benn family saga, culminating in its present populist aristocrat who has been driven by noblese oblige and a non-conformist conscience into the career of a latter day Gracchi.

The career of Anthony Wedgwood Benn is a classic example — if the matters drawn to our attention by Mr. Jenkins can be taken at their face value — of the Lysenkian theory that environment is more important than heredity.

Sprung from the loins of liberal popular radical and patriotic British non-conformist stock, Anthony Wedgwood Benn represents a drastic falling away from the essence of radical politics.

While he may plaintively cry for an explanation for the co-existence of wealth and poverty, his uncle, in one paragraph, explains the delusion of all those who seek a state socialist answer to the injustices of the world.

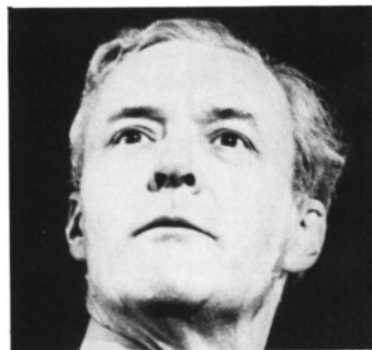
More importantly, as Mr. Jenkins shows, it was Tony Benn's grandfather, John "Bravo" Benn, who as representative of the progressive party on the first London County Council elected under the Local Government's Act of 1888 carried out a substantial, radical reform of the municipal government of the

Kingdom's capital city. While Mr. Jenkins is full of praise for the liberal John Benn, he neglects to record the fundamental plank of the progressive party which helped win it the first council election in London, namely the taxation of vacant land.

It is a shame that, rather than looking to his own roots and studying the career of his grandfather, the present representative of the Benn family in the politics of the UK allows himself to be seduced by all the trendy environmental and ecological jingles. Mr. Jenkins clearly portrays the weakness in Mr. Benn's character which leads him to embrace urgent and infallible solutions, solutions which his career have proved to be passing thoughts without substance. The ends which Mr. Benn embraces are laudable and his conscience is beyond reproach. Mr. Jenkins unconsciously reveals, by his careful accumulation of detail of political crisis after political crisis in the affairs of his subject, how a facile reaction to outside events divorced from a reasonable world view, based on a consistent philosophy, will lead to mere fashion and dilettantism.

While recommending Mr. Jenkins' biography, there is one reader who has most to learn from perusing this biography. One can only hope that Tony Benn, by reading the first chapter "The Inheritance of Dissent", will be persuaded to search deeply into the archives of his grandfather and come to a simple and logical explanation about an economic system which permits human need to co-exist with 30 million unemployed people in the industrialised world. His grandfather was driven by conscience and an understanding of the principles which govern land, labour and capital, principles which he could only have absorbed from close and reasoning attention to the theories and solutions promulgated by Henry George, which are part of the political heritage of that time.

If now Tony Benn, while repudiating his aristocratic antecedents, would embrace his true political inheritance, we may one day be able to cry, as Gladstone did of his grandfather: "Bravo Benn!"



● TONY BENN

## HOOKED ON AID

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In Reagan's administration, the welfare state is much bigger than it was in Roosevelt's day, and if it is brought down, it will not be by much; pressure from all sides will prevent that.

The ideal of a free market and a free economy, little government and low taxes is often invoked but it is not within sight. So long as people feel the edge of insecurity, restricted opportunities, periods of recession and unemployment, they will cling to the welfare state, onerous and cumbersome though it is.

The growth of the welfare state leads to an intolerable state socialism and the reduction of the welfare state leads back to the intolerable business cycle. We are "between a rock and a hard place," unless our leaders seek a more fundamental solution that begins with reducing land monopoly and speculation and opening up natural opportunities. Then may we welcome freedom and find that it can go hand in hand with prosperity.

Roosevelt missed this lesson and opportunity, and Reagan is evidently going to miss it. Can we hope for a future leader who will grasp it?

**T**HE MALAYSIAN Government's Capital Issues Committee (CIC) has tightened the rules for approving land acquisitions by publicly-listed companies.

Approval will not now be given where development has not started or not expected to contribute to earnings of the acquiring company in the current financial year.

The CIC is alarmed at the widespread practice of over-valuing land in company books to create surpluses which are then used to make bonus issues.

More recently, unacceptable valuation practices have been employed by companies which have revalued their land and then exchanged their assets for shares in publicly-listed companies.

**Herbert Meyer on the history of a controversial family**