
Matthew Parris

Why Tony Benn is always right

Ahmed was an Arab student I befriended in my first year at university. You would have described him then as a lonely and distrustful boy. By our second term, he was hostile and suspicious. In our second year, he was taken away. He had become paranoid.

I remember him battering at my door in the night, shouting, "Mr Matthews, urgent! There's a death ray! Quick! It's killing me - come fast to see it!" and, seizing me by the arm, pulling me into his room. A distant porch light shined through a hedge, barely discernible through his tightly-drawn curtains. "Ahmed," I said, "that's not a death ray. It's somebody's porch light, shining through your curtains."

"Mr Matthews, please listen. If you wanted to kill a man secretly with a death ray, would you make it look like a death ray? Would you colour it blue and place it outside his window, with warnings written DANGER: DEATH RAY? No. You would make it look like something else - how do you say - 'disguise'. Make it so his friends would say it was nothing, would say he was mad."

The episode as a whole made a powerful impression on me. I had always previously thought to advance a wrong theory it was necessary to be ignorant or malevolent: to be unaware of the evidence, or to twist it. But Ahmed was neither more ignorant than I, nor did his conclusions do violence to the evidence upon which they were based. His logic was no more tortured than that upon which the average party manifesto is founded.

I concluded that it is very difficult to argue against the grain of another's thinking.

I thought of Ahmed recently, when I went to Battersea Town Hall for a meeting to rally support for the striking miners. The star attraction was Tony Benn. I had always wanted to see one of his extra-parliamentary performances so (not wanting a fuss) I dressed like the others, and carried a copy of *Socialist Worker*.

Mr Benn was better than he is in Parliament. His style is not of the rabble-rousing kind. It is much more like Enoch Powell's: unemotional but intense. There is, besides, a great civility and a certain warmth. He inspires, among the converted, that combination of fellow-feeling and respect which it must be every socialist leader's aim to achieve: authority without rank.

They were young, his audience, some of them very young. Nor (as I remember from my own student days) were they mostly middle-class kids reacting against their parents. I doubt whether many of them enjoyed half the income a coalminer can earn; but Mr Benn took that problem head on, right at the start.

"Miners have better terms and better pay than most industrial

workers," he said. "And why? Because they have muscle and they have been prepared to use it. Their union has been solid. They are the vanguard of our movement. That is why Mrs Thatcher wants to break them." Completely waterproof!

Ahmed would wholeheartedly have approved of the latter part of the speech. "You read of different events in different parts of the world," said Mr Benn, "and I suppose some of you think they are unrelated. A coal-miners' strike in one part of the country. Safety problems with a nuclear power plant on the other side of England. Cruise missiles in Berkshire. Mr Botha at Chequers. Mrs Thatcher off to see Mr Reagan. *These things are all connected.*"

The audience was hushed, expectant. "The miners are on strike. Why? Because Mrs Thatcher wants to break them, and with them the whole trade union movement. The Government invests billions in the 'peaceful' use of nuclear power. Why? So they don't need to rely on coal. This will help them smash the miners."

"What do you need for a nuclear power plant? Uranium. Where is uranium mined? Namibia. Who controls Namibia? Mr Botha. *That's* what he talks about with Mrs Thatcher. And what is the by-product of nuclear plants? Plutonium. What is plutonium used for? Atomic weapons. Cruise, from America. Trident, bought from America. *That's* what Mrs Thatcher goes to Washington to talk to Mr Reagan about."

The pinnacle of the argument had still to be scaled. "Perhaps you have read," Mr Benn continued, "about the 'moderates' in Parliament. The Tory Wets, Mr Roy Jenkins, the Liberals... Perhaps you have been taken in by talk of them 'defeating' Mrs Thatcher. They are being prepared, now, for government. You will be told that they are 'challenging' Mrs Thatcher. You will be told that they wish to 'defeat' her. As the plan goes, there will be an election; and it will be announced that Mrs Thatcher has 'lost' to the moderates. But comrades, nobody will have lost to anybody. The Establishment will go on, as before, under a different style of leader, with essentially the same reactionary policies. Only the working people of this country will have lost."

I wonder where Ahmed is now? He knew, as they carted him away, that this only vindicated him. As the miners' strike crumbles, do not suppose that Mr Benn will think otherwise.

Correction

The reduction in coal stocks since the strike began, quoted by Mr Peter Walker and mentioned by Woodrow Wyatt on Saturday, should have been about seven million tonnes, not 76 million.

Why Tony Benn is always right.

Matthew Parris.

The Times (London, England), Monday, Dec 03, 1984; pg. 12; Issue 62002. (864 words)

Category: News

© Times Newspapers Limited

Gale Document Number:CS202215299