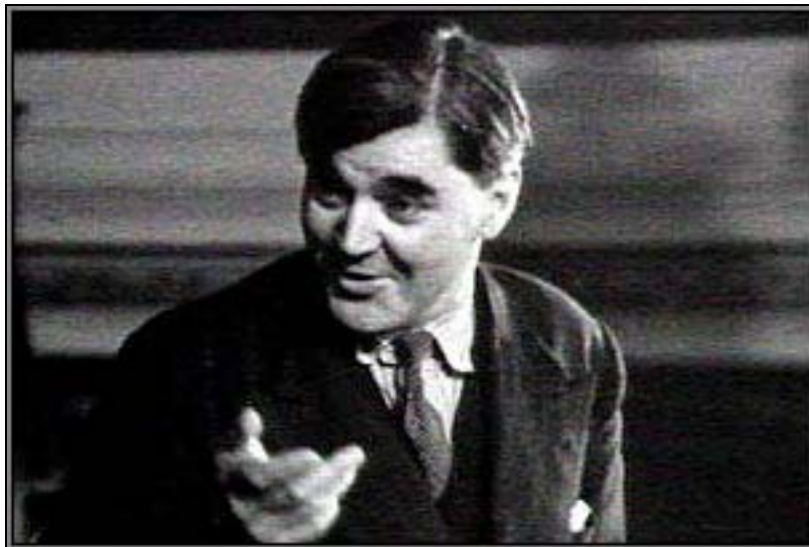


Never Again! Nye Bevan, Housing and Harold Hill

It is important to go into detail on Margaret Thatcher and Aneurin Bevan: both made well-publicised visits to Harold Hill at the height of their political career – 1949 and 1980, and both were political giants leading the opposing ideologies of socialism and capitalism. They were creatures of their own respective eras, in which they became leaders that were followed by their own ‘Bevanites’ and ‘Thatcherites’. Thatcher and Bevan were instrumental in ushering different phases in post-war British society, and attracted admiration or outrage. Their views within the framework of the twenty-first century may seem a little dated, but within their own periods they were cutting edge.

Aneurin Bevan was born on November 15, 1897 in the mining town of Tredeger, south Wales. He was one of ten children; of which only 6 survived into adulthood – a family size and mortality rate common at that time. Although his childhood was poor, it was never abject poverty, but his youth ended on his thirteenth birthday when he went down the pit to work. It was an experience which even at 60 he claimed still shadowed him with nightmares. The danger to life and limb was constant: ‘the runaway trams hurtling down the lines, frightened ponies kicking and mauling in the dark, explosions, fire, drowning.’(1) What also left its mark was the complete fatigue that left him asleep at the table during every mealtime: ‘There is a tiredness which leads to stupor, which forms a dull persistent background to your consciousness.’(2) But even at this age his anger was total: ‘Never treat those people (the bosses) as if they are your superiors’(3) a fellow co-worker remembered being told.



Politics in this part of the world was ubiquitous: it was part of the daily fibre. The union was the South Wales Miners Federation and in the days before the welfare state it had responsibility for its member’s health, education and recreation. The union was everything from cradle to grave; dawn to dusk. And the union, being no more than the sum of its members, was the entire community.

The young Bevan quickly graduated to organised politics and was elected to the local District council in April 1922 and in these preparatory years the young radical concentrated on what in 1945 was to become his national responsibility: health and housing. In the same vein as he later argued, he declared ‘Rabbit-warren accommodation leads to a rabbit-warren mind.’(4)

Using this local government experience as a foundation he later became the Labour Ebbw Vale MP in 1929. Winning a comfortable majority, he subsequently stood for a further 8 elections in his home constituency, always increasing his majority no matter the fortunes of the national party.

Bevan was now ready to impose himself upon the national scene and to carry an already well-cemented local reputation further. The fire of his opinions being characterised by 'two outstanding qualities, somewhat unusually combined: a remarkably well sustained level of primitive anger at the capitalist system and all its consequences in human misery and degradation, and a rare and sophisticated self-taught intellectualism which was to form an unshakeable commitment to socialist theory and – paradoxically again – a philosopher's love of ideas for their own sake.'⁽⁵⁾ In his own self-certainty it meant that those in the Labour ranks who sought compromise in government (nearly everybody before the war) was detested: it was in his view simply cowardice disguised as politics. It was this attitude that on one hand led to a deep hatred of Ramsey MacDonald who had led the Labour Party into coalition with the Tories in the 1930's; while on the other hand he also became a close confidant of Oswald Mosley in 1930, and who, at that time, was still a Labour MP fiercely arguing within parliament for drastic action on the appalling unemployment situation, but who, within a couple of years, was to found and lead the British Union of Fascists.

By the time of the fifties the left-wing of the Labour Party had claimed him as their champion; a standing that still exists today, but in truth he wasn't theirs to claim, he was too much of a maverick. He was a rare figure in any political party, Labour or otherwise, in that he never required any sycophantic acolytes to give him the confidence to express his views, but which sometimes left him liable to offer opinions when some quiet advice would have correctly recommended silence. He was expelled from the party once, and nearly expelled on several other occasions, but his appointment to the Cabinet in 1945 suggests that his rugged individualism had won some respect from more mainstream figureheads. Clement Atlee simply stated later that he thought he'd 'do some good'.



Aneurin Bevan had been subjected to increasingly frequent personal attacks from the press from the early 1930s onwards, some of which was outrageous in its class vilification⁽⁶⁾. Bevan, now firmly in control in his Cabinet seat, let no chance slip in reminding his previous detractors that he was no longer just a backbench upstart. Of

the Tories he declared they were 'lower than vermin', while the press was 'the most prostituted in the world.' Needless to say, the money and property class didn't appreciate being called rats and whores. The Daily Mail responded by saying 'No wonder he is called "dirt mouth" in American and a "twisted mind" in Britain. His trouble is that he hates so many and so much...' (7) While Winston Churchill threw back the personal slur in the House of Commons by declaring that he was 'a person who so obviously needs psychiatric attention.' (8)

The situation in his Ebbw Vale constituency was the polar opposite and he was treated as a conquering hero, 'a lion amongst men': his homecomings from London were occasions for mini-festivals. Bevan's standing amongst the poor nationally was one of admiration and when Gallop commissioned a poll in 1950, Labour voters responded by naming him their favourite for premiership. Equally, his respect within the party itself was high. In October 1952 the mass ranks of the Constituency Labour Party (that is, individual members) voted their assigned quota onto the National Executive and Bevan came top with just below 1m votes.

Not merely was he at the centre of the national debate – either as hero or demon; but his name was increasingly making an impression internationally with world leaders forming opinions on him as far away as America, Russia and China.

In 1949 Bevan was at the top of his ascendancy; not only had the house building programme come into full fruit, but the National Health Service finally came into being on July 5, 1948 after years of wrangling and debate.



His speaking skills, sharpened to a razors edges after years of bellowing in the Commons, were characterized by 'a remarkable range of moods and styles, often within the same speech: one moment bitter and accusing, the next sweetly pleading; persuasive or threatening, provocative or teasingly humorous; always with a startling fertility and freshness of phrase.' (9)

It was this show that many came to witness when he first came to Harold Hill in November 1949.

The reason for his visit was to open a special block of bungalows for the elderly that were sandwiched between Colne Drive and Paines Brook Way. It was a cold, blustery day, and as he spoke in the large temporary tent there was the constant background noise of a working crane.



‘There is nothing worse than for old people to see their companions and friends going to their end like ripe fruit dropping from the tree, to see a constant procession of funerals and corteges passing their windows every morning. We should keep them on the move for as long as possible.

‘I remember making my first speech in the House of Commons on the post-war housing programme in 1945. I had no idea in 1945 that I would still be responsible for housing in 1949.

‘When I looked forward anxiously to the problem we had to face in this particular field I was not sufficiently optimistic to believe that I would see my major plans fructifying.

‘What I said then was, and it looked to many people as a very distant view indeed, that on our post-war housing estates we must try not to have some of the worse features of the pre-war housing estates. I meant that to be applied not only to local authority estates but to private estates as well.

‘I see I have been getting into trouble with the newspapers again over the weekend - I always seem to be getting into trouble; yet what I thought I was stating seems an innocent point, that it is undesirable in modern society for different income groups to be segregated from each other; that it was a good thing for all of us to live in communities as mixed as possible, and that some of the glories of our old villages, apart from the Manor house, had been that they contained a complete cross-section of the community.

‘One of the bad features of the pre-war housing estates consisted in the fact that local authorities were responsible for housing what were called the working classes, and large estate organisations made themselves responsible for housing what they called the middle classes. The result is that you can see coming into our great cities every morning streams of people of different kinds from different places. I think that a bad thing.

‘Furthermore in 1945 I called attention to what had been a very bad feature of our social organization – old people’s estates.

'The workhouse was a hideous thing. But what is only next in hideousness is the segregation of old people. I said then that I wanted the old people to live in mixed groups, so that they can see the perambulators as well as funerals. There is nothing worse than for old people to see their companions and friends going to their end like ripe fruit dropping from the tree, to see a constant procession of funerals and corteges passing their windows every morning. It was really a desert that we were creating for them.

'Therefore, when we are making our housing plans, we must see that in the middle of our housing villages there will be old people's homes, so that they can take an interest in the full life of the community, and that death can take them almost unawares, not that they shall see it approaching self-consciously in the fate of their neighbours.

'Now we have completed more than one million homes since the end of the war. That is a quarter of a million more than the previous target established by the previous government. I am not saying that in any partisan spirit at all, but to show we have passed a very important milestone.

'The population in London region in 1939 was 8,746,500. The number of dwellings then was 2,150,500, and the number of persons per dwelling was 4:1. In 1948 the figures were: Population 8,354,000, estimated dwellings 2,174,000 and the number of persons per dwelling, therefore, down to 3:9.

'They are very significant figures indeed. What they show is that, despite agitation - and I don't quarrel with that; in fact, I sympathise with it - there are more houses per head of population in London itself, and in the London region than there were before the war. In other words, we have made good the loss of houses during the war.

'All the houses we are now building are an actual improvement on the situation as it was before the war.

'Yet, nevertheless, the London boroughs, the urban districts on the outskirts, and the L.C.C. themselves have long waiting lists, and we all know that there are large numbers of folk living in overcrowded conditions.

'The reasons why we have got large waiting lists, the reason there is still a housing problem is that the social standards of our people are very much higher than before the war. Before the war two million people were out of work.

'They could not go on housing lists, because they could not afford it. Now they are on the lists. We have closed the workhouses, and old people are now living in their own homes.

'Furthermore, old people are now able in most cases to go on living in the houses in which they have lived all their lives, and their children when they get married - when they can - get houses. So that you have this peculiar situation of high numbers of young folk living in overcrowded houses, and old folk living in houses too large for them.

'In other words, if we were able to - of course, we aren't, and we don't want to - to re-distribute the population, we would not have a housing problem in terms of accommodation. You would have under-occupation and over-occupation. It therefore becomes of the utmost importance that homes for old people shall be provided so that they can leave their houses for families.

'Therefore this enterprise of the L.C.C. should be followed as an example by local authorities all over Great Britain. I feel that it is a desirable thing that we should bring our old folk in the middle of estates where they can be looked after - I have a special interest to keep them out of hospital!

'It seems to me that we have three phases: One - when they are all right, two - when they are not able to perform their full round of duties and household chores, get a little wearisome, and three - when they are so ill they have to be looked after permanently.

'I want phrase two to last as long as possible - it's better for the old folk, and not so expensive for the community, for one very great problem of modern society is looking after the aged, chronic sick, keeping them out of hospital as long as possible in homes of their own where they can live their own lives.

'All these things that we are doing we can only do by planning. It's no use leaving them to the impulse of private action. They won't happen that way. They have to be planned. Not only have we to plan the houses, but to plan the welfare. These Darby and Joan clubs rising up all over the country, with their voluntary workers, are also a result of planning and organisation made as far back as 1946.

'When we want to see in Great Britain is a proper co-operation between the state organisation on the one hand and voluntary private help on the other. We give grants, provide the machine, and then invite voluntary help to run it.

'That's what these Darby and Joan Club's mean. Their meaning is that it is the duty of the young and middle-aged folk to look after the old folk. That makes our lives much richer, because you don't begin to have your life until you begin to give it away.

'When we have completed these estates people will be coming to see us from all parts of the world, and we shall prove that the old English oak has plenty of sap in the branch and plenty of leaves on the tree.'(10)

If anybody expected some Bevan fire they were to be disappointed. The Romford Times called him 'mild-mannered and urbane', which was a reflection of the contents of his speech. The retired and working, according to Bevan, were to live side-by-side on the new estates, but more importantly; so were the classes. Despite the derision from his right-wing detractors in parliament and the press, and the class focus of latter day biographers, here was Aneurin Bevan, self-declared Marxist, calling for reconciliation between the classes because division was 'a bad thing' for society. It was in the new planned order, of which Harold Hill was a part, that this closing of sharp social differences was meant to occur.

(1) Campbell, Nye Bevan, p. 9

(2) Campbell, Nye Bevan, p.9

(3) Campbell, Nye Bevan, p.9

(4) Campbell, Nye Bevan, p.20

(5) Campbell, Nye Bevan, p.4

(6) 'He was asked: 'Does your mother read much?' The reply was: 'My mother can neither read nor write.' Another man saying this would have added some words of explanation or an apology. Not Bevan. It was a boast on this man's lips concerning the class he believes is going to occupy the seats of the mighty. It is from this mother who can neither read nor write that Bevan inherits his abilities.' Daily Express, 1934. (Brome, Aneurin Bevan)

(7) Brome, Aneurin Bevan, p.189

(8) Brome, Aneurin Bevan, p.189

(9) Campbell, Nye Bevan, p.50

(10) Romford Times, Wednesday 30, 1949