

Shameless!

T Dan Smith, 'Voice of the North', Downfall of a Visionary

Chris Foote Wood

Bishop Auckland: Northern Writers, 2010, £14.99, p/b

You Can't Say That – Memoirs

Ken Livingstone

London: Faber and Faber, 2011, £25, h/b

T DAN

This biography is woefully presented, has clearly not been proof-read and is littered with elementary spelling errors, appalling punctuation, random paragraphs of the narrative being repeated in full, and meaningless references to non-existent footnotes. The author, Chris Foote Wood, owns the Northern Writers imprint (i.e. this is a self-published work) and has previously published a biography of his mother and a history of UK seaside piers. He is also a Liberal Democrat activist, served as a Councillor in Bishop Auckland for 40+ years and stood, without success, for election to either Westminster or the European Parliament on 12 occasions.

A significant amount of the material contained in the book appears to be at variance with the Wikipedia entry on T Dan Smith. It is unclear whether the book or Wikipedia is to be relied on; or if, possibly, a composite narrative of Smith's career could be assembled from them. This is a shame because Smith clearly had an interesting life.

Red Dan

He came from a strongly nonconformist and left of centre family, his father being active in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in the early 1900s. By 1936 T Dan had joined him, moving rapidly to a significant position in the hierarchy of this small party. He was also a lecturer at the now forgotten Labour Colleges and heavily involved with the Peace Pledge Union,

speaking frequently at mass meetings and rallies around the UK. In 1939 he declared himself a 'war resister', advocating many times in public the classic Trotskyist doctrine that the workers should 'take no part in the bosses' war'. A paid official and organiser of the ILP from 1940, he was monitored by MI5 but no action was taken against him. Perhaps this was because he was declared unfit for war service on medical grounds and thus never had to actually register as a conscientious objector.¹

In 1944 Smith and a number of his friends and colleagues were expelled from the ILP for opposing co-operation with the Labour Party. They remained together and joined the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), a very small Trotskyist faction whose most prominent members were Ted Grant and Gerry Healy. Like them, Smith regarded the Labour Party 1945 election victory as a disaster. Sometime around 1947/1948 he and his group left the RCP. Smith stated that he was expelled for 'Centrist deviation'. His colleague Ken Skethaway, however, is quoted on pp. 43-44: 'eventually the RCP was disbanded and we as individuals joined the Labour Party.' The author – who as a Liberal Democrat may not be aware of the finer tunings of Trotskyist manoeuvres – notes that 'most of' Smith's ILP group first met him in the Peace Pledge Union in the '30s, became 'war resisters' and then moved with him through the ILP and RCP and then into the Labour Party.

What actually happened? In 1947 the RCP had extensive internal discussions about whether to remain outside the Labour Party or to become 'entryists' and join the organisation. Gerry Healy led the faction that favoured entryism and the subsequent move of Smith and his group into the Labour Party in Newcastle should be seen in this light. Certainly the comments made by Smith after he had joined the Labour Party – for example 'with 6 people you can control a

¹ In later years Smith was criticised by Gerry Healy as having 'avoided' the moral opportunity to declare himself a conscientious objector and, thus, to have lessened any inconvenience to himself. This may have been true. On the other hand Gerry Healy, as a citizen of Eire, was in the enviable position of being exempt from conscription.

City, with 10 the country' – read like classic entryist tactics. In 1950 Smith was elected to Newcastle City Council claiming in his electoral literature to have been a 'life-long' member of the Labour Party.²

Councillor Smith

Throughout the book the author maintains that Smith wasn't motivated by financial considerations and was not interested in personal enrichment. But...he then tells us that from 1947 Smith owned 7 different companies that carried out painting and decorating work for local authority clients across the north of England. One example of these contracts, with Newcastle City Council, was worth £17,000 per year in the mid '50s (approximately £800,000 today). Of course most of this would have gone to pay for staff, materials, overheads etc. But from this work Smith earned a very significant salary for the time, enough to buy him a Georgian town house, a Jaguar car (regularly upgraded), and many holidays abroad. He also paid for his children to go to private schools, maintaining, as have all those doing this before and since, that like any parent he only wanted the best for them.³

In 1958 Labour took control of Newcastle from the Conservatives and Smith, despite his contracts with the housing department, became Chair of the Housing Committee. By most people's standards he should have been playing little or no role on the council. The author does not appear to understand this. Instead we learn that Smith proved very adept at declaring an interest and either being absent or out of the room when matters to do with his direct pecuniary interest were being discussed. The author also appears not to

² The faction within the RCP that disagreed with Healy was headed by Ted Grant. Renaming themselves the Revolutionary Socialist League they too 'entered' the Labour Party in 1952 and became in the '70s and '80's better known as the publishers of *Militant*. Healy's group shuttled between entryism and separate status as the Socialist Labour League (from 1959) and the Workers Revolutionary Party (from 1973).

³ Smith was an atheist and objected to any religious trappings at state schools. He therefore sent his children to Bootham School in York, an establishment founded and run by the Quakers.

understand why some elements in the Labour Party would have been hostile to Smith. I would have thought the reasons for this were obvious: most adults in the '50s and '60s had served in the war and many would have taken umbrage at a noisy, non-serving 'war resister' becoming prominent in local government in their town. Smith had not 'done his bit'. The possibility of Smith being unpopular because of the mismatch between his rhetoric and private life, and his habit of 'running' decision-making in the local Labour Party via a small groups of his personal friends, is also not considered.

In 1960 T Dan Smith became leader of Newcastle City Council. It quickly became clear that he had a far greater vision for the area than most of his contemporaries and was happy to act in a broad bipartisan fashion to achieve his objectives. It also became clear, beyond Tyneside, that he was considerably more gifted than many in local government. He favoured British involvement in what was then called the Common Market and in early 1962 hosted a visit to Newcastle by Willy Brandt.

Clearly a powerful, clever and ambitious man, he was spotted by others. In February 1962 he met John Poulson, who ran at that time the largest architectural and design practice in Europe. Poulson was anxious to obtain personal introductions to prominent councillors across the UK. Smith agreed to work for Poulson for a payment of £2,300 per year (£77,000 in current prices) and would arrange meetings between Poulson and prospective clients from which business and contracts might flow. In addition, if Poulson and his favoured building contractors, Bovis (the family firm of Sir Keith Joseph MP, then Minister of Housing), obtained work, Smith would be awarded a 1.5% commission. A typical commission might be £30,000 (£1,000,000 in current prices). Between 1963 and 1967 Poulson paid Smith £156,000 – £5,400,000 in current prices.

To manage this public relations work (which continued throughout his period as leader of Newcastle City Council, and supplemented his earnings from the painting and decorating work) Smith created a set of limited companies. There were

eventually more than 30 of these, in a structure that is reminiscent of that deployed by Robert Maxwell. To help him run this intricate network Smith hired a number of staff, a key figure being Mike Ward, an employee of the Greater London Labour Party, chief whip of the Labour Group on the London Boroughs Association and a councillor himself in the London Borough of Havering.⁴

Through his extensive Labour Party connections, his tireless advocacy for the north east and his public relations work, Smith met George Brown MP. In October 1964 Brown, deputy leader of the Labour Party and newly appointed as Minister of Economic Affairs, offered Smith an important position at the Department of Economic Affairs. Smith declined – but accepted the role of Chair of the Northern Economic Planning Council, believing that this would be a better use of his time than working – essentially – as a civil servant in London. To facilitate his new role in 1965 he resigned from Newcastle City Council.

Later Smith came to regard this as a miscalculation. It turned out that Brown had little real power and when, in October 1966, the Northern Economic Planning Council published its report *Challenge of the Changing North*, advocating regional government and a massive decentralisation of power across the UK, there was indifference and hostility at the highest level; and despite Smith's contacts 'at Court', no lever that he could pull to ensure his objectives.

He fought on and peaked in 1968. On 18 March that year Smith was guest of the week on 'Desert Island Discs', a kind of anointment, confirming his importance as a public figure. He chose the usual set of classical records, and threw in a piece

⁴ Mike Ward was in the 'Gaitskellite' group within the Labour Party. He later sat as Labour MP for Peterborough (1974-1979) during which period he served as a PPS to Reg Prentice and William Rodgers. He left the Labour Party in 1981 to join the SDP. His daughter is Alison Seabeck, Labour MP for Plymouth Moor View since 2005.

In the 1964 election Smith put his resources at the disposal of the Labour campaign and claimed – after the very close result – that he made a significant difference to the outcome in a number of marginal seats. He may have been right.

by the British jazz pianist Michael Garrick to demonstrate his love of contemporary arts. Later that year he hosted the opening of the Newcastle Civic Centre (by King Olaf V of Norway), a building that Smith had ensured was designed to act as a Regional Parliament.⁵

Nemesis

In late 1969 Poulson was declared bankrupt. Smith no longer worked for or with him at this stage but details of their working arrangements came to light during the very extensive hearings that followed. Initially Smith was charged in January 1970 with corruptly procuring a building contract for Poulson in the London Borough of Wandsworth. He was acquitted of this offence in July 1971. It then emerged that in 1966, when Poulson was anxious to bring on side Alderman Cunningham, a very prominent and powerful figure in the Labour Party in the north east, Smith had agreed that one of his companies could 'employ' – the work involved was actually non-existent/meaningless – Cunningham's wife. The money for this arrangement, which lasted 3 years, was passed from Poulson, through Smith to Mrs Cunningham, who was paid in her maiden name, presumably to conceal the matter. In late 1973 Cunningham, Poulson and Smith were charged with corrupt practices. Recognising clearly that a second acquittal was unlikely, Smith pleaded guilty in April 1974 and was – to his surprise – sentenced to 7 years in prison. His career was over. For the remainder of his life, protesting a little bit too much, Smith bemoaned that his only real 'mistake' had been to 'employ' Mrs Cunningham.

Alderman Cunningham emerges here as a formidable and unsavoury figure: a Labour councillor in Felling, Gateshead

⁵ The Council Chamber at Newcastle Civic Centre is designed to accommodate 139 Members, far too many for the local authority, but sufficient for a Regional Parliament. The possibility that getting the King of Norway to open a major building rather than a UK royal would have put a number of establishment noses out of joint is not considered by the author. It can hardly have helped Smith. Similarly Smith was very active in a number of European local government organisations – such as the International Union of Local Authorities, whose conference he attended in Prague in April 1969.

from 1939, a county councillor from 1946, and simultaneously holding positions as chair of the North East Regional Airport Authority, chair of the Wear and Tees River Board, chair of the Tyneside Passenger Transport Area, member of the Aycliffe New Town Board, member of the Peterlee New Town Board, chair of the Durham County Police Authority, regional secretary from 1964 of what is today the GMB union, member of the Labour Party National Executive Committee and treasurer of the Labour Party.

During the final *débauche* with Poulson, Cunningham used his power and influence within the Labour Party to block calls for an enquiry and also to deselect anyone unwise enough to publicly call for this.⁶ The notes of his questioning by the police – in which he gives completely deadpan and minimalist replies to all enquiries – are particularly repellent, especially as he served as chair of a Police Authority. Despite this, after his release from prison in 1977, Cunningham was still held in sufficient regard by prime minister James Callaghan (who employed his son Jack Cunningham MP as his PPS while Cunningham Snr. was in jail) to be visited for afternoon tea.

Smith emerges in a somewhat kinder light. The author makes the point that Smith, Poulson and Cunningham were all prosecuted as individuals rather than the companies they controlled being pursued as corporate bodies, as British Aerospace has been in recent years. This is a weak argument. The law will always regard some companies – particularly private limited companies – as being effectively controlled by the individual directors. Hence the individuals are held responsible for significant misconduct. On the other hand the author is quite right to point out the iniquity of Sir Keith Joseph MP and Reginald Maudling MP, who both had very extensive and profitable dealings with Poulson, emerging unscathed

⁶ A particular target was Eddie Milne, MP for Blyth Valley, who was deselected by his CLP on the eve of the February 1974 general election for backing calls for an enquiry into the Poulson–Smith–Cunningham dealings. Ironically Milne had earlier been a ‘war resister’ and ILP activist with Smith.

from this particular episode.⁷ It could also have done with being spelt out a bit more clearly in the narrative that working as a lobbyist, which is now commonplace across the entire political and governmental machine, in our recent past was looked upon as a very dubious activity. Would any lobbyist today be sent to prison for 7 years?

Although T Dan Smith had a finely judged and accurate view of how the UK establishment works (and had a fully formed set of policies to address this), it is hard not to agree with the view of John Halliday, a solicitor in the north east, on p. 287 of this book: 'I believed him to be guilty. But I found it very difficult to dislike him.'

Ken

This is an enormous doorstep of a book – over 700 pages – and Livingstone's first full attempt at an autobiography. He relies heavily on previously published accounts by John Carvel and Andrew Hosken while providing some additional embellishments of his own. The book is written in a matter-of-fact and chatty saloon bar style and reads rather like a somewhat one-sided conversation with a taxi driver. The narrative of his Lambeth childhood in the '50s is pleasing; there is some fresh detail about his trip across Europe to Nigeria in 1966 (he kept a journal which is quoted extensively here) and much on his zoological interests; but in many other respects the account is anodyne and somewhat self-serving....like most politicians' memoirs. Perhaps because Livingstone is now quite elderly, he also mentions various illnesses and ailments suffered by him and his family more often than one would expect in a political book. On reflection this might be considered not so much a political work as an example of that contemporary phenomenon, the celebrity autobiography.

⁷ Reginald Maudling managed to avoid censure for activities that ought to have brought him into disgrace, or even sent to jail. He resigned as Home Secretary in 1972 due to his own connections to Poulson. In July 1977 he narrowly avoided expulsion from the House of Commons following an enquiry about his dealings with Poulson and the award of construction contracts in Malta.

Minor details

This feels like a selective and tactical attempt to head off adverse publicity in the run-up to the 2012 London Mayor election in which Livingstone is, again, the Labour candidate. We learn that his uncle, also confusingly named Kenneth Livingstone, was a very active member of the Conservative party in Streatham and later joined the National Front. We are also told that Livingstone agreed to father children by two female members of the Labour Party in Brent in the late '80s and early '90s. This was alluded to in 2007–2008 but further details at that point had not emerged.⁸

Amongst the many issues that are not clarified or expanded upon by him are:

- * whether or not he had any significant involvement in the Young Conservatives;
- * the identity of his first fiancée (mentioned on p. 69 as someone he knew circa 1966-1968 – did he meet her via the Young Conservatives?);
- * his time in the Trotskyist and Reichian group Solidarity in the late '60s;
- * his expulsion from the Lambeth Labour Group in 1972 and how he managed to wangle his reinstatement;
- * precisely when and how he met Gerry Healy and Ted Knight;
- * when his ambition to become leader of the Labour Party first emerged;
- * how – in detail – he expected to realise this ambition;
- * how the Trotskyist group Labour Briefing operated;
- * how much (if anything) he knew about Libyan funding of *Labour Herald*, the paper that Gerry Healy printed and Livingstone and others produced;⁹
- * when he first met Socialist Action and how that group

⁸ To date none of Livingstone's ex-partners (the unnamed '60s fiancée, Christine Livingstone, Kate Allen) have published 'kiss and tell' memoirs. It would be interesting to read their version of these events.

⁹ The probability that documents detailing the Gaddafi-Healy link comes to light in the next few months must be quite high.

operates (their existence is not acknowledged anywhere in the text);

* how much he was involved in the appalling antics that wrecked the Brent Labour Party after 1980;

* and a whole slew of other now forgotten campaigns that he concentrated on while a backbench MP in the '80s and '90s.

It may be that he considers that it would not be in his interest to expand on any of these matters.

Livingstone does describe the disputes that wracked the Anti-Racist Alliance in the '90s.¹⁰ This occupies a single page in the book. What is not mentioned is that the core of the dispute was the attempt by Livingstone, Diane Abbot MP and Socialist Action to take over the ARA. Why was it so important for them to control the anti-racist agenda? Livingstone says it was because of a need to campaign against racist attacks in London.

Has he always been consistent about his? Consider, for instance, the New Cross Fire in which 13 young black people were killed – long considered to have been the result of an arson attack, and possibly racially motivated. The inquest into their deaths took place at County Hall in May 1981. There is no mention at all of this in the book – though in May 1981 Livingstone could perhaps be forgiven for missing the event given that he was then fully occupied (at County Hall) in the coup that removed Andrew Mackintosh as leader of the GLC. The reader may also reflect that it is curious that Livingstone, Abbot and their little band of Trotskyist foot soldiers focussed on the case of Stephen Lawrence whilst being absolutely silent about Damilola Taylor, a young black victim of one of the large number of nasty black gangs in London. They are certainly very careful and selective about which issues and cases they campaign on.

Of some interest are Livingstone's views on economics. Unlike most MPs he took some time and trouble to acquaint himself with a working knowledge of how the UK economy

¹⁰ A colleague who participated in this as part of what Livingstone would regard as 'the wrong side', described this to me as the most traumatic and upsetting political episode in which he had ever taken part.

works, how it compares with other similar countries and how it might be improved to general benefit. In an extremely general sense most of his views are correct – but he then falls flat on his face when citing a specific example. He says that France increased its prosperity and moved ahead of the UK when De Gaulle cut French defence spending by 40% and invested instead in major domestic infrastructure projects and social spending. This is not true. De Gaulle actually insisted that France have a completely independent and domestically produced nuclear deterrent (at significant expense), detached France from NATO, closed the US bases in France, maintained National Service and a string of extensive military facilities in Africa, the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Today France has all of these things – as well as more tanks, soldiers, ships and aircraft than the UK – while apparently spending less on defence than the UK. Why is this? Perhaps they account for ‘spending’ differently. Perhaps we get very little value for money, particularly the costs of working in tandem with US requirements on everything. Although cutting defence spending may be an effective tactic for rallying ‘the left’ behind one when standing for office, simply cutting defence spending isn’t an economic panacea. Livingstone doesn’t do complicated arguments.

There is very little generosity in this book. In his account of events Livingstone is always correct or vindicated by events. People who disagree with him are all written off as ‘terrible right-wingers’, although some are magnanimously allowed by him the dispensation of being ‘an intelligent right-winger’. He also claims credit for many things – most notably the original GLC plan to cut public transport fares – that he had little real involvement with.

At various points the tone veers into anger. His defeat in the ballot to choose the Labour candidate for Mayor of London in 2000 (p. 404) is something he finds particularly outrageous and is worth quoting:

‘Realising they couldn’t win without fraud, Dobson’s supporters – without his knowledge – encouraged MPs to call on party members to collect their ballot papers.

Members could vote by phone or post. When MPs or their staff turned up on the doorstep helpfully offering to collect ballots, members innocently handed them over. The MP could then open the envelope, reseal it if it was for Frank, but if for me they could use the identity code and phone the vote in for Frank. The worst example of theft was by Southall MP Piara Khabra, who boasted that he personally had collected 300 ballots. After I was readmitted to the party in 2004 one Labour MP told me "that was only the half of it"....'

Really? Who were 'Dobson's supporters'? Which MPs did they encourage? Which among them interfered with the ballots? Note that he specifically blames Piara Khabra, but only says he 'collected 300 ballots', not that he interfered with them. Who told him about any of this? Which MP made the statement in 2004? Did Livingstone know about these supposed activities in 2000? Did he tell the police? Reading this type of stuff carefully, it is clear Livingstone has no proof of anything – only that he didn't (and doesn't) have the support of the majority of Labour Party members in London, something he considers so odd that it can only be explained by the existence of a conspiracy against him. Piara Khabra died in 2007, and therefore cannot sue. Many of those mentioned unflatteringly in the book are similarly deceased.

The bigger picture

And yet.....it's not all bad. Within the vast amount of text describing Livingstone's rise through local government and especially in the final 40 pages, a number of points are made. It emerges that Ken isn't really left-wing at all. We learn that the KGB looked at him in the '80s and concluded that he wasn't a Trotskyist. When he was mayor of London the mayor of Berlin concluded that none of his proposals were in the least bit radical by German standards. He provides some additional material on the nature of the Blair-Brown years that chimes with much that has now appeared. He concludes that the only policy Blair, Brown and Mandelson had worked out in detail prior to 1997 was how they would deal with the

media.¹¹ He argues in favour of devolution of power to regional government, integration with the EU and a different approach to how public spending is categorised. He despairs of the Labour Party, acknowledging instead how much better he found John Major as a political leader. It is hard not to agree with him on many of these matters.

But what legacy does Livingstone now leave? Local government is significantly less resourced than when he won his first election in 1971. Regional government has not been adopted across England, and even in regard to Wales and London, the model chosen by Labour in 1998-1999 has few of the powers enjoyed anywhere else in the world. He introduced cheap public transport fares in London in 1981 – but we now have the most expensive public transport in the world. He did not become leader of the Labour Party. He did not become prime minister and held no significant position in his 14 years as an MP. The UK is not part of the Euro Zone and remains an irritating, semi-detached member of the EU. Public spending limits are still determined by Treasury fiat. Ken is now in his late 60s and his Socialist Action and Labour Briefing colleagues are similarly ageing. When he dies he has no obvious successor as the central figure in the ramshackle coalition of 'the left' that he fronts; it has always been heavily about him and his own ambition. It is hard not to conclude that he will leave no legacy.

Losers?

Comparing both these books, with all their faults, one wonders if T Dan Smith and Ken Livingstone are just examples of losers in UK politics. T Dan Smith was clear that you had to get the Whitehall mandarins out of the way if the UK was to achieve real progress and prosperity. The Home Counties/civil service-based parliamentary dictatorship had to be broken. Regional government, on the European model (though it could equally emulate that in the US, Canada, Australia etc,) was

¹¹ Another way of looking at this would be that Blair/Brown/Mandelson did have a clear (and simple) policy: they would not antagonise any powerful interest groups.

essential. Investment on a level that would never be agreed by the Treasury was the ideal. To the end of his life Smith tirelessly (and fruitlessly) advocated these views.

Livingstone appears to be similarly disposed. So, too, was Edward Heath, another loser in the English system. Michael Heseltine also espouses this approach – and never became leader of the Conservative Party. George Brown and his team at the DEA in 1964-1966 thought the same. All have come to nothing. Perhaps Alex Salmon will succeed in Scotland in the near future where they have failed. From the vantage point of 2011 it is striking how successful the English establishment has been at keeping power.....a point of view with which many hard leftists such as Gerry Healy (who knew both Smith and Livingstone) would have started all their arguments 70 years ago.

Simon Matthews