

Confessions of a Labour loyalist

Sailing Close To The Wind: Reminiscences

Dennis Skinner and Kevin Maguire

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In his extremely useful memoir of the Blair government, Adam Boulton notes that the unlikely figure of Dennis Skinner had been 'recruited into Blair's big tent'. He goes on to comment on how Skinner 'had been surprisingly cuddly towards his middle-class leader throughout Blair's years'.¹ Mark Seddon, the former editor of *Tribune*, also comments in his memoir on Skinner's 'good relationship with Blair, who would actually have him round to Downing Street on a regular basis'.² He was less impressed when he learned that Skinner 'regularly reported back from the NEC to Alastair Campbell',³ apparently acting as an informer for the Blairites! How on earth can we account for this fiercely working-class socialist, the veteran of numerous strikes and campaigns, giving his support to Blair and his New Labour government? Indeed, it is all the more surprising when one considers that part of the New Labour project was precisely to ensure that people like Skinner never again became Labour MPs! The likelihood is that when Skinner finally retires, his seat will go to some Labour placeman or woman, a special adviser, a banker or someone in public relations. What light do Skinner's reminiscences throw on this conundrum?

Skinner is a lifelong militant socialist who, in his own words, has over the years 'backed every left-wing cause going'. Although he has one of the best attendance records of any MP, he emphasises the importance of 'extra-parliamentary action, particularly through the trade unions'. He has 'been on more picket lines, marches and demonstrations, and spoken at

¹ Adam Boulton, *Tony's Ten Years: Memories of the Blair Administration*, (London, 2009) p. 22

² Mark Seddon, *Standing For Something: Life in the Awkward Squad*, (London 2011) p. 155

³ Seddon (see note 2) p. 243

more rallies and meetings than I can count'. He lays into billionaire Mike Ashley. His firm, Sports Direct, is notorious for its use of zero hours contracts and shows us all what a fully-realised neo-liberal Britain would look like with employees from the university to the warehouse reduced to a new servile status. 'Greedy bosses such as Ashley', Skinner writes, 'are why I shall be a socialist as long as I breathe'. What is needed to deal with the likes of Ashley are 'new employment and trade union rights'. But he doesn't explain why the Blair and Brown Labour governments did not introduce such legislation between 1997 and 2010.

The book's best chapter is on the 1984-85 miners' strike, which he describes as 'the most honourable strike I have ever taken part in'. Men went on strike to save other men's jobs, enduring immense hardship, the daily abuse of the press and a degree of police repression not seen since the 1930s. As he points out, the union argued that Thatcher 'had 70 pits on a secret hit list' and planned the effective destruction of the coal industry, something that was vehemently and categorically denied at the time. Thirty years later, 'we got to read the proof in black and white. The official documents vindicate the miners, their families and their supporters'. The Tories lied. If the truth had been known, the miners certainly would have won. Even so, as Skinner argues, they still came close to victory.

He is scathing about the conduct of the police and the courts: 'Striking miners were stripped of civil rights, victims of summary justice'. Men were jailed 'on the uncorroborated testimony of police officers who made it up as they went along'. He spoke at some 200 rallies in the course of the strike and regularly took his place on the picket line where the 'hostility of the police was frightening.....They were emboldened by immunity'. For the duration of the strike, he gave his MP's pay to the union. In the end, though, the odds were too great and the miners were starved back to work. The defeat was heartbreaking and Skinner vows that 'I'll never forget those who lied and betrayed the miners'.

This is not altogether the case, though. While hatred

and loathing of Thatcher and the Tories is etched into every page, he is much more forgiving when it comes to the leadership of the Labour Party. As he acknowledges, during the strike Kinnock was 'working against rather than with us'; but this is described merely as 'an enduring pity'. And this really captures the weakness of Skinner's politics. He is above all else a Labour loyalist; so that when the leader of the Labour Party refuses to support the miners it is merely a 'pity'. And what of Tony Blair? Skinner supported his leadership of the party and thought that the Blair governments had many worthwhile achievements to their credit. He must have missed the discussion of Thatcher and the trade unions in Blair's memoirs, especially the passage where he wrote about how she was absolutely right 'about the excesses of trade union power'⁴ and made clear that he supported her attacks on the unions.

Skinner was on the picket line during the Wapping lockout where once again the police 'were a law to themselves'. Police brutality was 'ferocious', but as he puts it, 'Murdoch backed Thatcher and Thatcher backed Murdoch'. Absolutely true, but he seems to have completely missed Blair's relationship with Murdoch, a relationship that was, if anything, closer than Thatcher's. He was to be godfather to one of Murdoch's children after all. Indeed, in his memoirs, Blair acknowledges a 'grudging respect and even liking' for Murdoch, who did, after all, have 'balls'.⁵ Not only that, but the refusal of the Blair government to introduce the 'new employment and trade union rights' that Skinner regards as necessary was, at least in part, so as to avoid alienating Murdoch. Only in part, however, because Blair was strongly anti-union in his own right without any prompting from Murdoch. Blair's close relationship with Murdoch, the most pernicious force in British politics in the last fifty years, goes unremarked.

This brings us to the nub of the problem: as far as Skinner is concerned the Labour Party is 'on the side of working people', even when it clearly isn't. No matter what

⁴ Tony Blair, *A Journey*, (London, 2010) p. 42

⁵ Blair (see note 4) p. 98

Labour governments do, Skinner supports them, apologises and covers up for them; and all because they are somehow mystically 'on the side of working people' – even when they proclaim themselves the 'party of business' and wholeheartedly embrace neo-liberalism. Is this unfair? Skinner at one point describes how he supported a picket of Atos which, as he puts it, was 'given a contract to persecute Britain's disabled'. This is absolutely admirable and one can only wish more Labour MPs did similar. What he forgets to mention is that Atos were awarded the contract by the Labour government, not the Coalition. He praises the Blair and Brown governments for 'saving' the NHS, conveniently forgetting that they began the process of privatising health just as they began the privatisation of schools. He voted against these things, of course, but still supported a Labour leadership that was busy entrenching Thatcherism in place when it had a large enough majority to root it out.

When the Tories are in power, Skinner embraces 'extra-parliamentary action', but when Labour are in power his opposition seems to be confined to the Commons. While he boasts of how many demonstrations he has been on, he does not even mention the largest demonstration in British history, the Stop the War march of 15 February 2003, presumably because it was against a Labour government. He ferociously condemns Thatcher for her relationship with Ronald Reagan, but is much more relaxed about Blair's relationship with George W. Bush, a relationship that was sealed in a great deal of blood. The disastrous Iraq war that dominated the Blair years shamefully gets less than a page of text and the lies that were told to inveigle us into the conflict are dealt with extremely shabbily: 'a convincing case was never made for military action'. And that is it! This is not good enough and only serves to highlight the disabling effects of Skinner's Labour loyalism. And, of course, in the 2010 Labour leadership elections, he voted for the Blairite and US State Department candidate, David Miliband. Loyalty can only justify so much.

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