

Is this what failure looks like?

Brian Sedgemore 1937–2015

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Brian Sedgemore's obituaries in the major media were reasonable. The broadsheets were fair-minded and covered his life's main points without snidery. There were no obvious inaccuracies and, in terms of column inches, they were probably longer than usually accorded to a backbench MP. The accounts were clear that he was independently minded and latterly something of a rogue elephant on the Labour benches.

Perhaps they could have paused to reflect on how much he had achieved by the time he was thirty-five: brought up by a single parent on a council estate, he had already served in the RAF, graduated from Oxford, worked in the Civil Service (with Bob Mellish MP at the Ministry of Housing), and been called to the bar and practised as a Criminal Law barrister. He was elected to Wandsworth council when Labour regained control of the authority in 1971¹ before being selected a year later as Labour prospective parliamentary candidate for the newly created seat of Luton West. How many MPs in 2015 can claim such a background?

Rising star

Elected MP for Luton West in February 1974, he was quickly seen as a rising left-wing star. He spoke well. He wrote well. Using his experience of working with the mandarins (and watching them slyly undermine Labour ministers), he helped draft the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES), adopted by Tony Benn as a campaigning tool in early 1975. Framed to cast Labour as firmly opposed to the decisions taken by the preceding Conservative government (and of course, by implication, critical of any accommodation with those hinted at

¹ Labour won Wandsworth – at that point a pre-Thatcher, pre-gentrified area of London à la *Up the Junction* – in 1971 and held it until 1978.

by Wilson, Jenkins, Healey and Callaghan), its central thrust was virulently anti-Heath. Thus the AES recommended that the UK should leave the EEC and also (mistakenly) accused the Conservatives of being the party of increased taxation.² When the UK voted to stay in EEC in June 1975 the central part of this approach became obsolete. However, the AES remained a prop of left politics, being revived as an alternative by Benn in the summer of 1976 during the negotiations for an IMF loan; and, though defeated again then, alluded to for many years afterwards.

Just prior to this, on 14 March 1976, Sedgemore had made his TV debut on the politics show *Weekend World*, presented by Peter Jay.³ He appeared with Neil Kinnock, whose CV at this point included membership of the Institute of Workers Control and who was regarded by some Labour MPs as 'the new Nye'.⁴ Which of the two would get a first footing on the ladder of ministerial office? At this stage (and not alluded to in the obituaries), it was Sedgemore who duly became parliamentary private secretary to Tony Benn at the Department of Energy, an appointment looked at askance by Callaghan who regarded him (but not Kinnock) as trouble; surely an endorsement in reverse if ever there was one. Knowing how the Treasury worked and how the economy functioned on a macro scale was clearly not something regarded as essential in the upper echelons of the Labour Party, certainly post-Wilson.

During his time with Benn, and for some while afterwards, Sedgemore wrote an anonymous column for *Private Eye* on the workings of the City of London. He also looked back at files covering the 1964-70 Labour government,

² Primarily because of the introduction, by Heath, of VAT. Not because Heath cut the standard rate of income tax.

³ Labour royalty, and married to Jim Callaghan's daughter. Appointed UK Ambassador to the USA by Callaghan in 1977. His father, Douglas, had been MP for Battersea while Sedgemore was a local councillor in the area and was President of the Board of Trade 1964-1967.

⁴ Kinnock's *Who's Who* entry for 1975 states that he had published *As Nye Said...* Actually the book never appeared and was deleted from subsequent entries after he became Labour Party leader. See *London Review of Books* 20 September 1984.

finding clear proof that civil servants had frequently misled ministers. Much of this found its way into his novel *Mr Secretary of State* (1978), the plot of which revolves around a left-wing Labour politician being comprehensively and covertly undermined by the state. It was readable, up to a point, in the style of George Bernard Shaw, with two-dimensional who spout ideas and theories. Sedgemore, though, was no literary Shavian. Nor did his ministerial career prosper. Callaghan infamously decided against an autumn '78 election – when he might well have won – and went to the polls in May 1979, duly losing to Margaret Thatcher, and thus ending (although not all saw it like that at the time) an era of high-spending Keynesian interventionism. Sedgemore was one of Callaghan's casualties, losing his seat in Luton West by 246 votes (despite increasing his own support) to Tory Monday Club member John Carlisle.

Financial salvation came via a stint as a researcher at Granada TV while he searched for a new seat. Kinnock, meanwhile, prospered. With trade union connections, friends in the US embassy in London,⁵ and a safe seat in a 'traditional Labour heartland' (features Sedgemore conspicuously lacked throughout his career), Kinnock's potential was spotted by Callaghan, and, with references to the Institute of Workers Control erased from his CV,⁶ he became Shadow Spokesman on Education in June 1979, thus commencing his ascent to the parliamentary leadership. Eighteen months later, Sedgemore, helped by his Bennite connection, was selected for Hackney

⁵ This is in an interview with Carl Dillery, Political/Military Officer, at the U.S. embassy in London, 1973-1976.

DILLERY: Take an important case. Thatcher's current head of loyal opposition, Neil Kinnock, was a junior MP when I was there. Our Labor Party reporting officer, Jack Binns, was a real friend of his. He was a great party guy and would come to all of our parties and talk to all of us.

He and Jack were on a first name basis. So Jack became the political counsellor when Kinnock got to be the leader of the Labor (sic) Party. Literally, Binns could call up and have access to him at any time.'

See <<http://www.adst.org/Readers/United%20Kingdom.pdf>>.

⁶ For Kinnock and the Trotskyist IWC see *The Times Guide to the Election 1970*.

South and Shoreditch after its sitting Labour MP Ron Brown defected to the Social Democratic Party (SDP).⁷

With the SDP/Liberal Alliance polling 50% at this point (and leading the polls continuously from October 1981 to April 1982 during which period Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins won by-elections) matters were clearly complicated but most commentators still calculated that Labour would win an election held in 1983-1984. The 'Broad Left' in particular were organising to this end, through Ken Livingstone and Ted Knight, in the hope of having the numbers in the Parliamentary Labour Party to allow Benn to oust Labour's post-1980 leader, Michael Foot. Sedgemore's selection in Hackney South could be seen in this light.⁸ Instead of picking up a significant role in a future Labour government, though, he found himself plunged into the whirlpool of London politics, while nationally the war with Argentina rebooted the Conservative vote and saw Thatcher first past the post in June 1983.

Opposition

Back in the Commons, rather than returning to a ministerial career, Sedgemore found himself in opposition and concentrating on being an exceptionally good constituency MP, while fighting a locally ascendant Liberal Party which had won seven seats on Hackney council a year earlier (an echo of the simultaneous Liberal rise in Tower Hamlets and the election of Simon Hughes in Bermondsey in February 1983). He did his surgeries, responded and instigated correspondence punctiliously, chaired a local housing association committee and knocked out a second novel, *Power Failure* (1985). At Westminster he was a pragmatic Treasury Select Committee member, but with Labour – arithmetically – out of it for ten to fifteen years, he lost interest in the Tribune Group and developed a strong dislike of Diane Abbott after her election in

⁷ The Hackney South and Shoreditch CLP had actually decided, in the interests of unity, to reselect Brown, only to be told by Brown at the meeting that he had 'a little lifeboat' and was joining the SDP.

⁸ Anthony Blair was a keen Bennite in Hackney South – a pose he noticeably avoided whilst simultaneously seeking selection in various locations in the North East of England 1980-1983.

Hackney North and Stoke Newington in 1987, considering her to be lazy.

Not surprisingly the major media obituaries avoided narrative complications like this. However, it should be noted that although Sedgemore might have set himself apart from the sterilities of the hard left, he was not particularly liked either by the local middle class Labour Party membership (a modest but influential grouping led by Glenys Thornton, Charles Clarke and others), nor by many women members. Matters reached a low point when *Power Failure* was passed around the constituency General Committee by the Women's Section with its 'dirty bits' underlined (!) Things didn't improve with time. In the late 80s he was publicly cut and humiliated by Kinnock in the House of Commons and deeply hurt by this. He got reselected in 1985 and 1988 but his early and firm criticisms of well known figures – for example: 'Gordon Brown is completely mad' circa 1990 – made to a local membership inclined to loyalty and with no means of judging the comments, puzzled many. In time, though, many turned out to be broadly accurate, particularly his claims made in a local meeting in 1989 that 'the City of London produces absolutely nothing of value to the wider UK economy'. He was particularly pleased at the progress made locally after 1990 when the leadership of the council ditched the leftist politics of prior years and successfully sought huge inward investment. He was always willing to lobby Michael Heseltine and Sir George Young (among others) and get more money into Hackney.

After 1994 the combined attentions of the Livingstone gang and the emerging Blair cult proved trickier to deal with. Roger Warren Evans, a colleague of Glenys Thornton's, led a serious attempt to deselect him but Sedgemore survived.⁹ Locally an increasingly nasty battle started between a group of councillors backed by Abbott and Livingstone and the incumbent leadership in Hackney – people who generally had Sedgemore's support. He backed them again, as did a formal Labour Party enquiry led by Vernon Hince. Facing expulsion in

⁹ Roger Warren Evans was a colleague of Glenys Thornton at the Institute of Community Studies, and a long time associate of Michael Young

the summer of 1996, the Abbott/Livingstone-supported faction escalated their media campaign against this by alleging a cover-up of historic child abuse in the borough, claiming, *inter alia*, that this now involved the General Secretary of the Labour Party Tom Sawyer (due to Sawyer and his officials' refusal to budge from the findings of their enquiry) and that the failures in the past were due to political correctness toward gay Labour Party members locally; and involved – by implication – many prominent persons who had previously been Labour Party members in the area. The Abbott/Livingstone-supporting faction were duly expelled and formed their own political grouping, named, at the suggestion of Diane Abbott, Hackney New Labour. The denunciations, and Sedgemore's noisy defence of himself and his colleagues, continued for the next two years.¹⁰

The strange case of Mr Betts

Brian Sedgemore was re-elected in May 1997. In the general excitement during and after the Blair landslide the weird goings on in Hackney South and Shoreditch were not accorded any publicity. Perhaps they should have been. Sedgemore was the only official Labour candidate in the UK to have a New Labour candidate run against him. The individual, Terry Betts, described himself in his election address as having been a financial consultant in the City for fifteen years. He was unknown locally and had only moved into the area in October 1995 when he purchased a house in Chart Street N1 with his partner Marcello Manfrini.¹¹ He had no known earlier political affiliations and none subsequently. He had not campaigned on any issues affecting the area prior to announcing his candidacy. He left the UK immediately after polling day to manage – with Manfrini – an upmarket holiday retreat in Tuscany that 'regularly wins prizes as the best bed and

¹⁰ The allegations themselves were that a deceased, gay social worker, Mark Trotter, had been allowed to abuse children because of his local political connections. No proof of this was ever found.

¹¹ Land Registry details and election address statement from Betts.

breakfast in the world'.¹²

During the election Betts had an up-to-date Labour Party membership list for the constituency, which he used for a personalised mailing shot explaining his candidacy. Betts also produced an expensively printed eve of poll leaflet, which appeared on the same day as the official Labour Party leaflet in exactly the same style, font and colour (purple); which was odd, given that nobody outside the upper levels of the Labour Party knew about the choice of the colour purple for the final campaign leaflet. Among other things his literature stated that he supported Tony Blair, that 'we need to maintain our armed forces and our military standing' and that he was against a federal Europe and a single currency. In short, he was impeccably new Labour, unlike Sedgemore.

On polling day Betts polled 2346 votes and saved his deposit. That evening, in the Town Hall assembly rooms where the votes were being counted, he apologised to Sedgemore 'for what happened today' – not something a genuine independent candidate would have done. It suggests that Betts didn't know what he was doing and had probably been asked to run by a third party. Sedgemore denounced Betts and his actions in a House of Commons debate on electoral fraud on 21 May 1997.¹³

But who asked Betts to run? It looked like an inside job: but was it just another manifestation of chaotic Hackney infighting, or, was there someone high up in the Labour Party who had previously been a member in the area and was desperate to avoid being dragged into a media storm about a gay/political correctness 'cover-up' of alleged abuse?

¹² See <<http://www.tuscanbreaks.com/pages/hosts.htm>> and also statement 'we live here and have provided accommodation to visitors to this region since 1997'.

¹³ See Hansard 21 May 1997. Curiously, Betts was also co-director of Financial Analysis Bureau Limited with one Stanley Swaine, presumably a business partner. Swaine had been arrested and charged with handling stolen goods (which turned out to be comedian Bob Monkhouse's notebooks) at the point Betts entered the fray in Hackney. See *The Independent* 19 November 1996 at <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/bobs-laughing-as-his-jokes-make-a-recovery-1353059.html>>.

The Betts candidacy certainly allowed the Labour Party leadership to adopt a 'plague on all your houses' jocularly toward Sedgemore in particular and Hackney generally. Something like: 'We don't know who our candidate is in Hackney!' That is we don't take Brian Sedgemore seriously – and neither should you.

End game

Whatever the case, it was pretty clear after May 1997 – if not so beforehand – that Blair and Brown had no use for MP's like Sedgemore. (Nor even much for centrists like Giles Radice, who, after making some mild suggestions at a Treasury Select Committee that there should be slightly more regulation of the City of London, found himself being phoned up at two am and threatened by Gordon Brown.)¹⁴ Times had changed and newly-elected Labour MP's were now much more conformist than had been the case twenty to thirty years earlier. Sedgemore immediately did himself no favours by deriding the New Labour female intake, referring to them as the Stepford wives. He occupied himself with local struggles and after wide-ranging fraud at the 1998 council elections he reported a number of specimen cases to the police. Two years later the main perpetrators of the fraud were jailed and it was admitted that the 1998 elections in Hackney – where 'officially' the council had gone hung – were in fact elections that the Labour Party had won. It was a small victory but one that had the effect of making him valuable to the Labour leadership nationally as a kind of licensed attack dog when the London Mayoralty elections loomed and Ken Livingstone swung into action as an independent candidate. Blair expelled Livingstone from the Labour Party in 2000, but Livingstone won anyway.¹⁵

¹⁴ This is recorded in the Mullin diaries, and I have had it privately corroborated by a friend.

¹⁵ The Livingstone apparatus in 1999-2000 ran almost the same campaign (largely involving the same people) as it had done twenty years earlier when Livingstone was seeking the Brent East CLP nomination and the leadership of the GLC. One of the curiosities of the Kinnock era was that while Kinnock took action against Militant (because they were seen as a threat to Labour in the north) he avoided action against Livingstone.

A year later Sedgemore announced he had fought his last General Election. His final years in the Commons were largely friendless. He features a couple of times in the diaries of the period (Benn, Mullin), usually in the role of a minor comic commentator.¹⁶ After the Iraq war he was increasingly vituperative about Blair and despised the calculations made at the highest level of the Labour Party in 2003-2004 to readmit Livingstone so that opposition to Blair and the New Labour project did not reach a critical threshold. Shortly before polling day in May 2005 he very publicly defected to the Liberal Democrats, being formally welcomed into the party by Charles Kennedy MP. His former colleagues in Hackney, who knew nothing of this beforehand, were stunned.

There was no second act, no seat in the Lords, no position on a quango or enquiry; and, curiously, no more writing or journalism. He faded away into retirement. Could he have got further in politics? It is interesting to compare him with Chris Mullin: like Sedgemore, active in the Labour Party as far back as 1970, originally a Bennite and briefly a colleague at Granada. Mullin was offered a minor ministerial position in 1999, surviving in a succession of these until 2005. Reading his account of this now, it seems clear that Mullin was helped by being an MP in the North East, and, by virtue of his well known 'leftism', useful perhaps to have around at the lower level of government if only to encourage the troops that Blair and Brown welcomed a broad range of opinion. It's not clear that Mullin (or others like him) being in government made any difference at all to the political direction taken by Blair and Brown. But Mullin had a bigger dose of loyalty than Sedgemore and could be relied on. Neither Sedgemore nor Mullin were dangerous extremists and today neither look particularly 'left-wing'. It might be concluded that the loyalty shown by Mullin inhibited him from taking a more critical line earlier, and

¹⁶ Example from Benn's final volume.....Benn: 'Blair is being perfectly disgraceful. He's behaving like Mussolini.' Sedgemore: 'No he's not. Mussolini made the trains run on time.'

therefore prevented wider debate.¹⁷

Many have said that the left were comprehensively defeated in British electoral politics in 1983 and prior to that in 1979 too. We might argue long and hard about what 'left' means in the context of UK politics, but, given what featured in the Labour Party manifestos in 1979 and 1983, this doesn't seem an unfair conclusion. With Labour now expelled from Scotland and facing ten to fifteen years in opposition, with both Kennedy and Sedgemore dead and the Lib-Dems knocked back from their post-Iraq/Kennedy era peak of sixty-two MPs to a mere eight, are we not seeing something more ominous? The recent decision of the new Conservative government to vigorously pursue allowing only English MPs to vote on laws affecting England (the important stuff) automatically gives Cameron a majority of one hundred and four. It will surely usher in a lengthy era of free market economics, low spending, low taxation and limited public services. London will continue on its path as Europe's offshore version of Dubai with the rest of the UK resembling Kansas or some other similarly hopeless US midwestern state. For the English Tories all their Christmasses have come – without even the need for legislation to permit this (the new voting arrangements apply once Parliamentary standing orders have been amended by a single majority vote).

Should we now say that 2015 saw the centre being comprehensively defeated in UK politics?

Is this what failure looks like?

¹⁷ Similarly, Ann Clwyd MP, a strong personal friend of Sedgemore's, held senior Shadow Cabinet positions under Kinnock and Smith from which she was dropped in 1995. Under Blair she proved a useful, loyal and supportive backbencher on the Iraq war (due to her long affinity with the Kurdish people).