



Office Without Power: Diaries, 1968-1972

Tony Benn

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Tony Benn's second volume of diaries, which spans the years 1968-72, is a unique record of British politics as observed both from the heart of the Cabinet and the Labour Party.

George Brown's spectacular resignation and Cecil King's plot to overthrow Wilson are just two of the events which dominate the opening chapter, and introduce the last years of Labour's increasingly demoralised government.

And for the first time in a political diary, Labour's experience of Opposition after the unexpected and shattering defeat of 1970 is revealed. Here, too, are recorded the bitter arguments over the Common Market, in which Tony Benn emerged as the principal advocate of a referendum on Britain's entry - and which foreshadowed the Labour/SDP schism of 1981. The result is a fascinating and invaluable document of the times.

Office Without Power: Diaries, 1968-1972 Details

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Helen says

Surprisingly readable, considering there is a lot of detail here about internal Labour Party arrangements, and technology and industry, which are not really one of my main interests. Candid and witty. As it's a diary it has the immediacy of seeing the events of the time freshly, whereas we have the benefit of hindsight and know how it all turned out. (for instance, here is John Stonehouse, not yet famous for "doing a Stonehouse"). The discussion for and against referendums is interesting and enlightening (this was in the context of entry to the EEC, and it seems Tony Benn was a prime mover in favour). The period covered by these diaries also includes Enoch Powell's famous speech and its aftermath, the beginning of the troubles in Northern Ireland, the Apollo moon missions, and the power cuts.

There are some interesting parallels to recent and current events: the Labour Party was predicted to win the 1970 general election, but the opinion polls were wrong and the result was a great shock. There was constant tension within the Labour Party between the factions of the right and the left, and the leader, Harold Wilson, was convinced that the media in general and the BBC in particular were biased against him. Plus ca change!

Bill Lawrence says

I read this during 2018 (gradually working my way through the diaries). Benn's diaries are a great resource and a fascinating read, especially when you remember many of the events as they happened. What is particularly fascinating about this volume (and I suspect the next) is to read about the debates and arguments about Britain joining the, then, European Economic Community. The truly depressing aspect of the diaries (and no fault of Benn's) is that, 50 years on, nothing has changed. The arguments have not moved on, the debates almost identical and a rare UK referendum is under debate. Astutely, Benn articulates the problems facing the UK very well. The arguments and issues he raises cry out for a solution such as the European Union, and yet, he comes down on the other side of the argument. My politics lie close to those of Benn, in terms of his analysis, however, I do feel I differ in terms of solution. Sadly, the truth seems to be that UK politics has been kicking the can down the road for 50 years and never dealing with the core issues of an unequal society with unequal opportunities and unequal regional investment.
