

# COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Tony Benn

(b. 1925)

*The acknowledged leader of Parliament's populist left after Margaret Thatcher's rise in 1979, Tony Benn has the distinction of being Britain's longest serving Labor MP, with a 51-year tenure that lasted from 1950 to 2001.*

From "Benn, Tony." Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2001.

Benn was born the son of the 1st Viscount Stansgate and educated at the University of Oxford. His father was a Labor peer in the House of Lords, the non-elective legislative body of British Parliament comprised of nobility.

Benn served in the House of Commons, the elected body of British Parliament, for Bristol South East from 1950 to 1960. After his father died in 1960 he succeeded to his father's hereditary title and was transferred from the House of Commons to the House of Lords. Despite refusing to accept the title and being reelected to the House of Commons in 1961, he was prevented from sitting in the House of Commons by a judgment of the Electoral Court. His subsequent campaign to enable those inheriting titles to disclaim them led to the passing of the Peerage Act of 1963. Benn was the first person to disclaim a title under this act.

Benn again served as a member of the House of Commons for Bristol South East from 1963 to 1983. He was postmaster general in the 1964 Labor government and became a member of the Cabinet in 1966 as minister of technology. Following the defeat of the Labor Party in 1970, he was the opposition spokesperson on trade and industry from 1970 to 1974. He also strongly opposed Britain's entry into the European Community (EC). Benn was chair of the Labor Party from 1971 to 1972 and in March 1974 he became secretary of state for industry. At the time of the 1975 referendum he campaigned against the renegotiated terms of British membership in the EC, and in June 1975 he was appointed secretary of state for energy.

Benn sought the Labor Party leadership in 1976 but was defeated by James Callaghan. In 1981 he challenged Denis Healey for the deputy leadership of the party. Benn's narrow defeat established him as the acknowledged leader of the left. In 1984 he became a member of Parliament for Chesterfield and in 1988 he made another unsuccessful bid for Labor leadership

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against Neil Kinnock. His diaries *Out of the Wilderness* (1987), *Office Without Power* (1988), *Against the Tide* (1988), and *Conflicts of Interest* (1990) cover events of the period in detail.

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