**Andy Beckett**

*This interview took place 16 April 2024. It has been edited for clarity. The full version of the interview is in the film.*

**Andrew -** Hello and welcome to Bristol Ideas. I'm Andrew Kelly and I'm joined today by Andy Beckett. Andy is a *Guardian* columnist. He's also written for the *Economist*, the *London Review of Books*, *The New York Times* magazine and the *Independent on Sunday*. He's written a number of books including *Promised You a Miracle: Why 1980 to 1982 Made Modern Britain*, *When the Lights Went Out, Britain in the 1970s* and *Pinochet in Piccadilly*. We're talking today about his new book, *The Searchers: Five Rebels, Their Dream of a Different Britain and Their Many Enemies*. The book covers the lives, work and politics of Diane Abbott, Tony Benn, Jeremy Corbyn, Ken Livingstone and John McDonnell. Andy, thanks for joining us today.

**Andy -** Thanks for having me, Andrew.

**Andrew -** This is a book about the rise and fall of the Labour left since around the 1960s. I lived through some of the times you write about and was involved, peripherally, I would say, in some of the debates and activity. And there have been many disappointments for the left in that time. But this book is not an obituary for the left, is it? It's honest, but you still believe that the left's time may come?

**Andy -** Yes, the book is broadly sympathetic, but it's also strongly critical in places. And one of the arguments of the book is that a lot of the things that the left wanted in the late-60s, to do with greater personal freedom, to do with sexual and gender racial equality have, to a degree, been achieved. So, although the left has lost a lot of elections, I'd argue that it's actually won a lot of victories. And those victories are so part of the background of how we live now, that they're not often acknowledged. It's a sad book in places, but in other ways it's quite an optimistic book.

**Andrew -** That's one of the lessons that comes through, that how things that were very radical in the 1960s, you think of Roy Jenkins and the social change that he helped lead, have become quite mainstream. You also think of some of the ideas that were around then with things like greater worker control of industry, the state as an entrepreneur and so on. Some of those ideas are more mainstream and others have still to find their time, haven't they?

**Andy -** That's right. It's tantalising in a way, because the five people I've organised the book around, I think what they wanted was a left-wing politics that created a more equal country but also maximised freedom for people. It wasn't a top down, what the right might caricature as a Stalinist version of left-wing politics. It was very different. It was about empowering people, decentralising power. I think that's a very difficult kind of fusion to pull off to maximise equality and freedom at the same time. But in a way, that's what they were trying for. And that's why the book's called *The Searchers*, because it's the idea that they're looking for this new society, and readers might finish the book and think, 'Well, they were deluded, they were never going to get it', or they might think 'They're still looking and the opportunity is there'. And I think that idea of the country being more equal, but also freer, that's a picture of society that I think a lot of people in Britain under 40 really want. And another thing that's tantalising is that these figures are right about, they've been defeated electorally often, but I'd argue that their values are very in alignment with, if you like, the rising generations in Britain. There's a huge potential there for this politics, as well as opportunities that haven't been grasped so far.

**Andrew -** And that may make future elections very interesting, this burgeoning support, and I would add the climate issue as well to the push very much by younger people, even though many of us share their views and activity.

**Andy -** Absolutely, climate is very important. And some of the people I write about, for example, Ken Livingstone at the Greater London Council in the early-80s, there were things in the Labour manifesto in 1981 in London about recycling and about, not climate change specifically, but lots of green policies were in there really quite early, we're talking 35 years ago now, 40 years ago.

**Andrew -** Before we move on to talk about the people you've written about and some of the issues, I just want to define the left. This is the left in the Labour Party and Parliament. Is that right?

**Andy -** Yeah, and the people I've written about, they were all MPs. They're all Labour Party members. The way I define them is they're part of what I'd see as the forward looking left. All of them, whether we're talking about Benn or Livingstone or Corbyn, are all quite interested in digital technology. Benn wrote in 1970 about what, he didn't call it the internet, but what he called the new computer technologies would make citizens much less respectful of politicians. Benn himself was obsessed by gadgets. So, it's a forward looking left, it's not so much a nostalgic left, although I think nostalgia is important and valuable. But it's looking forward, thinking what's modern society like, and how can the left fit with that, rather than thinking, let's go back to past struggles. And let's commemorate what happened 100 years ago. It's a forward looking, and it's a freedom seeking left. The people I write about, they're all social liberals, they're all keen civil libertarians, they're not part of the more authoritarian left tradition. And although they were often smeared by the right as being pro-Soviet, if you look at their actual histories, they were all very, very critical of the Soviet Union for its lack of freedom. So, they're a part of the left, but they're quite a distinctive strand of the left, I'd argue.

**Andrew -** Let's talk about the five people you write about. We'll start with Tony Benn, because there's a nice Bristol connection here, with him being a Bristol MP for a number of years and transforming politics with his campaign and eventual victory of renouncing the peerage. Bristol was very important to him, I think. By the time I got to know him, he'd become the national treasure that you write about in the book. And this was quite a shift from being described as the most dangerous man in Britain by one of the newspapers, to this presence on the stage of someone that lots of different people from different political persuasions could go and listen to and respect?

**Andy -** He became an MP in 1950. He had over half a century as a politician. And he started out as an MP as a rather smooth, telegenic, almost Blairish figure in the centre of the party. And then he radicalised in the late 60s, which is where I come in in my book, partly because he visited an alternative university called the Bristol Free University, which was set up in 1968, during all the radical uprisings of that period by students from Bristol University who were dissatisfied with what they saw as a rather traditional university in the city. And it held courses for free that were open to anyone on things like feminism and Black rights and so on. And Benn went along. And it was an epiphany for him. And from that moment on in 1968, through the 70s into the 80s, he became a much more challenging figure who wanted to challenge the power structures in Britain in ways that his enemies saw as very dangerous. And he had that middle phase of being, as you say, in the view of the tabloids, a sort of future demagogue, the most dangerous man in Britain. But then, once he stopped being an MP in the early 2000s, he then became a cuddlier figure in the view of a lot of the same people. Lots of Conservative Party voters would come along to hear him speak when he did these book tours, where he would denounce Blair and Labour and so on. And he had those three distinct phases. Although he, I'm sure, would have argued that there was a consistency beneath. But I think to the outsider, he looks different in the three phases.

**Andrew -** One of the things that really struck me about Tony Benn when I talked to him was about this interest in technology. He'd been involved in telecommunications. He'd been involved in Concorde. He was well ahead of his time on that.

**Andy -** That's right. He was someone who always had a tape recorder long before the time most politicians had tape recorders. He just loved technology. And he saw technology as something that could empower people. He was a minister of technology in the 60s, and he thought that technology would also empower corporations. And he warned in the 60s against the rise of huge computer driven corporations, which is exactly the world we have now. He was initially a great supporter of the EU because he thought the EU would be a counterbalance against these big corporations, which is effectively what the EU has become to some degree. And Benn later turned against the EU, as we know. But it's forgotten that in the beginning, in the 60s particularly, he saw technology as a great threat, but also great opportunity in politics.

**Andrew -** One of the things I like about some of the people you write about is their ability to learn through life. Some of them are great readers. There's a marvellous moment when someone says to Tony, 'We need to tell you about feminism'. So he has a series of meetings with them. But then Tony's daughter started a campaign to introduce feminism in the Benn household.

**Andy -** That's right. He didn't do his share of the domestic duties, shall we say. And Benn's wife, Caroline, was a very important campaigner for state education and for comprehensive schools, and also an author. She had a very busy life herself. And I think some of Benn's kids, were like, 'Dad, come on, Mum's busy, too. Why are you not doing more of this?' So he's a contradictory figure. There are things about him that are quite old-fashioned, even the way that he dressed. Right into the 70s, he's almost dressing more like someone from the 40s or the 50s in correct grey suits and so on. But then as he radicalised, you see his clothes change, and he's wearing parkas and drinking mugs of tea and looking a bit more like a trade unionist. So he did change. But there's an old-fashioned side to him. He was born in 1925. Even by the 60s, he's into his 40s. And as we know, we don't always change that much in middle age.

**Andrew -** But he was one who moved more left as the years went by. I think that's also a significant point for him.

**Andy -** Yeah, he did. I think one of the things that interests me about Benn and about the other people in the book is they ask quite fundamental questions about power in the world and power in Britain, and who had it and who didn't have it. I'd argue that's one of the reasons why they created so many enemies, because lots of people don't want these questions to be asked. And Benn particularly was very good. He was very eloquent, asking in a very basic way, 'If I can elect my MP, for example, why don't I have any say over how my company is run that I work for?' That leads you down some quite interesting avenues. And he was asking those fundamental questions. And then the people in the book who are younger, Corbyn, Livingstone, Diane Abbott, John McDonnell, all of them in their different ways were asking these quite fundamental questions. I was very interested in what it was that so angered people about these five, all at different points in their lives had many death threats, smear campaigns in the press and so on, even though the politics they were offering wasn't particularly extreme. And I think it was that they asked awkward questions about power that a lot of people would rather were obfuscated.

**Andrew -** Just talking about the others. The two on power that come across particularly to me are Ken Livingstone, who I think understood how to get power and was successful as becoming Mayor of London. And Diane Abbott as well, I thought, was very strong on this.

**Andy -** That's right. I think of the people in the book almost like a five-a-side football team sometimes, that they all have different strengths and weaknesses as players. And Ken Livingstone ended up running the Greater London Council, which was London's very powerful city government, and then obviously became Mayor as well. And he was always terribly interested in how the left could get power and, if necessary, make compromises, but always had his eye on how can we maximise our leverage? Do we do it just within one borough, or within a city, or in a local party? How do we maximise that? And Diane Abbott likewise went to work for the civil service before she became an MP because she wanted to try and affect things. And she went to work for the Home Office because she thought that was the bit of the government that dealt most with a lot of Black people, particularly, through the prison system and so on, and she wanted to get inside the machine and challenge that. There's a kind of interesting tension in the book between the people who are thinking a lot about power, and the people who are maybe a bit more purist, particularly like Corbyn. And one of the ironies, of course, is that Corbyn ends up being leader of the party. But I'd argue that Corbyn, of the five people in the book, is maybe the most purist of them, and was probably the least interested, actually, in having power. And that was maybe one of the reasons why, as leader, he was, I'd argue, a rather flawed leader, because he wasn't necessarily thinking that hard about leverage and alliances and questions of power.

**Andrew -** Whereas you contrast him with someone like John McDonnell, who came across as rather cerebral, but became, I always felt, in the later stages of Corbyn's period of time, almost like the *de facto* leader, he was the one who was always on the television, making the case and so on.

**Andy -** That's absolutely right. Corbyn was leader for basically five years, and the last 18 months or so, it was quite a besieged leadership. And Corbyn had, I think, correctly decided that parts of the media, particularly things like the Today programme, were not sympathetic, and he just refused to go on. Now, whether that was a smart move or not, I'd question, but John McDonnell would often be there, as you say, as the front man for the whole thing. And in his late middle age, he'd become a very composed media performer.

John McDonnell's an interesting character, because in his younger days, he was probably the most dogmatic and ideological of the people I write about. He was in Militant Tendency, briefly, and his reputation in the House of Commons was as a rather hard figure politically. But he was always interested in how you build alliances, how you maximise that power. Antonio Gramsci, the great Italian political theorist, who was McDonnell's intellectual inspiration, wrote a huge amount about how the left had to build alliances and achieve hegemony, his famous term, through that. And McDonnell, because he's quite sure of what he believes, in a paradoxical way, is always ready to do business with people on particular issues in order to maximise his leverage, because he knows where he stands. I think McDonnell was more comfortable than Corbyn, for example, with talking to people on the Remain side in the Brexit issue, whereas Corbyn, although he became a reluctant Remainer, was always quite uncomfortable with some of those people because they were centrist, whereas McDonnell would talk to these people, Alastair Campbell and so on, and in some ways was a more strategically astute politician than Corbyn, but he wasn't the leader of the party.

**Andrew -** On this question of power and winning power as against making change happen, I think you're right that certain things have been achieved without necessarily power being achieved itself, winning the election and so on. You think about the minimum wage, for example, it was criticised at the time but is now widely accepted. You go back to the days of the NHS, which some doctors opposed to begin with, and now are one of the stoutest defenders of it. How important is it, do you think, that the left can achieve things without necessarily winning elections? Beyond the point that some people made that we've won the argument, beyond indeed Tony Benn's point about the 1983 manifesto, when he said it was a victory because eight and a half million people voted for the most radical manifesto since 1945. Almost like that long march through the institutions that you write about as well, that you influence and infect and make change happen, but not necessarily win an election.

**Andy -** I think that's very important. If you think of social change and how that happens, it often starts out with a small group of people behaving in a particular way, say, women who want to work on the same terms as men. I often think that if you put a radical idea for social change on the ballot too early, it will be defeated. If you put gay rights on the ballot in the 80s or the 70s, it would have been overwhelmingly defeated, whereas now even quite right-wing people are very happy about equal marriage, for example.

I think sometimes those questions, in a way, you have to use guerrilla warfare if you're on the radical side of things, on the right or the left for that matter. You maybe win a bit of electoral power, but you have to get sympathetic people inside the institutions and people protesting outside to collaborate. Livingstone particularly was very thoughtful about this, that you want people to be protesting on the street and you want people inside the local council or in government who have some sympathy and they can play off each other. The people inside can say, 'Look at those people outside, we need to give them something'. And the people outside can say, 'Look at those people inside, they're not too bad, let's do some deals here'.

I'm drawn into military metaphors because my dad was a soldier, but I think if you have a set-piece battle about these things, if you're a radical, you end up losing. I think we'll get on to this, but I think one thing that happened particularly in the 2019 election was that Corbyn's leadership presented a whole suite of radical policies and it was almost too much radicalism for a general election, and as a result they lost heavily. Whereas if you do it a bit more softly, you gradually win people over. Because I think a lot of people in Britain, whether they're on the left or the right, think of themselves as being on some level moderate or gradual in their approach to politics, but they can change a lot almost without realising it. I think the job of the left often is to take the majority of the population along with them in a softly, softly way, rather than presenting them with massive change up front, because then people just think, 'Whoa, that's a bit scary, or that's hard work, or I don't want that'. I think there needs to be a kind of deftness about how you present change to people.

**Andrew -** I often think about contrasting this with the growth of neoliberalism, for example. What's always struck me is the long-term way they did their own march through the institutions, but they also built the case over many years, the argument, they had the think tanks, they had the companies, they had the media work to make that case. And when I look now at what's going on, some of the things that really I find very interesting to deal with some of the great challenges we face, whether that's on climate, the future of work. Think, for example, of the four-day week as a project. The case is being made, perhaps gradually, but nonetheless it's being made through companies experimenting, but the think tanks doing the work as well. I think when you think about things like that, you begin to see how the left can continue to have this influence, even if you might not necessarily have a left-wing government in the future.

Take the four-day week as an example, here's a project led by think tanks, companies are experimenting, finding it works, and that might be closer than it's been for a long time.

**Andy -** I think that's a really good example, that's quite a radical idea. I did a big *Guardian* piece five or six years ago about what was called post-work. And it was essentially people saying the modern workplace isn't working for lots of people in terms of their family life, their social life, their earning, their satisfaction. So, what we need is a shorter working week. And the four-day working week now is something that councils are trying, that some of the UK governments are trying, the devolved administrations. And it's not necessarily seen as such a radical idea as it was five or 10 years ago. And companies are getting interested because they're saying, 'Oh, we're getting a lot out of people in four days.' So that's an example where there's an idea that's been formulated by various new think tanks.

When John McDonnell was working with Corbyn in the Labour leadership, there was a real flowering of interesting thinking in left-wing think tanks about how we can change the economy. And although Corbyn's leadership ended in huge disappointment, those people are still there in their think tanks. A lot of them are quite young, and those policy ideas are around. And one of the big questions about Starmer is that obviously on the surface, he's squeezed the left out of the party. He's been immensely critical of the left. But once he's in government, if he makes it, will he need to cast around some new ideas about reshaping the economy? Starmer talks about an economy that works for working people. Now, some people would say an example of that kind of economy might be an economy where people work four days a week so they can see more of their kids or they can look after their grandparents. So it may well be that with the economy in Britain functioning really poorly in terms of growth and productivity and its climate damage, that the economy will have to be rethought. And if it is rethought, a lot of the ideas that were around in the Corbyn period may well become part of that future.

People won't be saying, 'Oh, these come from the Corbyn era', because that would be seen as risky. But in reality, radical ideas that are around when there are crisis are the ideas that get picked up in the same way as you rightly say that when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were changing the world in the 70s and the 80s, they were casting around for their own ideas about how to change their economies, and they picked up on these radical right ideas that have been developed over decades.

**Andrew -** I think if you look at the pressures people are under, the lessons learned during the pandemic, even basic things like reducing commuting to work, and the fact that it doesn't seem to affect productivity, a four day week is probably closer than we might think. I also think it's interesting how older ideas are coming back in, like the idea of a universal basic income, which Nixon looked at, but now is seen as a more radical alternative adopted by the left as well. And those ideas might be possible to pursue in this new environment as well.

**Andy -** I think if you're going to be optimistic about radical potential for the left, you'd say one reason for optimism, as we've touched on, is the values of younger people are quite radical. But another is that the status quo is not working very well. When I first became a political journalist in the 90s, although I was on the left, it was the Blair period. And it was quite hard to say, 'Oh, well, we need a more radical economic policy'. Because at that point in the late 90s, the economy was growing. Most people in Britain, not everybody, but most people were getting a reasonably good deal out of it. But now we're in a very different period. For most people, the economic status quo is not working. So it's easier to say, 'Hang on, we need some new ideas here' in the same way that when Thatcherism first became very powerful, they were able to say in the mid/late 70s, 'Look, the status quo has got problems, here's our radical solution'. I think that opens up possibilities, because even people who are not remotely left of centre in their electoral behaviour will have a lot of unease about how the economy is functioning, about what pay rises they're getting, about what's happening to their kids' ability to buy a house or not or to even pay rent.

There's a radicalisation that you see. And if you look at the British social attitudes survey, it's very interesting that the public on the economy and how they regard it, are way, way, way to the left now of where they were 15 years ago. Now, that's not a permanent change, they'll swing back to the right at some point in the future. But currently, even quite right-wing people are very unhappy with how the economy is functioning. And that opens up ground that just wasn't there 15 years ago for the left.

**Andrew -** When you think about the term, the Overton window, what's acceptable at a particular time, we certainly are in that period. I look particularly at issues which affect cities, which is one of our main concerns. Housing is one of those key issues. And we're beginning to see a push for a much greater and bigger programme of building public housing, social housing, or indeed council housing, however you describe it, than we have seen for a long time. The big issue is how you make that happen. And that brings in issues like land politics, environmental issues, the cost of housing, and who pays for that. But nonetheless, I think there's a shift happening on that now as well.

**Andy -** Yes, I think you're right. And the politics of it is changing. Because if you take a city like Bristol, or a city like London, the proportion of people for whom the status quo is working is shrinking now. Even people who themselves are wealthy will have kids, if they're middle-aged, who are thinking, 'How the hell am I going to find anywhere to live? I don't want to live with mum and dad forever.' So whereas in the 80s, say, when the population of Britain was smaller, when there was more housing available, then the number of people who wanted a change was smaller, but now it's probably a majority. I think mayors, depending on what kind of powers they have, increasingly, again, have to say, 'We're going to bring in rent controls, or we're going to build more genuinely affordable housing, not fake affordable housing'. Again, it's tantalising, because you feel the problem is widely recognised. But at the same time, the powers that people have in local government in Britain have shrunk and shrunk. So even the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, his powers are pretty minuscule compared to the powers that Ken Livingstone had in the 80s. There's a tension there that we know things need to change, but Westminster is reluctant to allow local elected representatives to have the powers to change them.

**Andrew -** And this is a big problem, isn't it for cities and combined authority areas. But it's a big problem for the left as well, because the left has managed to achieve some impact in winning elections in big cities. But the powers are not just limited, they've been so emasculated over the years, that in the end there's this fear that they'll simply be managers of social care, and actually not very adequate managers of social care, because the budgets aren't there to deliver the services that are needed.

**Andy -** I think you're right. I think there's a terrifying picture for local government, generally, whoever's running it. I suppose my optimistic side says that the problem is so bad that if Labour can win the election, even though now they're saying, 'Oh, we won't bail out councils and all the rest of it', in reality, there will have to be some kind of new settlement around funding, otherwise councils will end up managing social care and nothing else and not even doing that properly.

I tend towards optimism. If you look, for example, at the council in Preston, which is led by Matthew Brown, who's a very interesting radical figure, inspired by Tony Benn, Preston is not a particularly wealthy city. And yet that council has done a lot of very progressive things around allying with local institutions, saying, for example, to the local hospital or the local university, 'All your procurement should be done locally, it should be done through local firms that have high ethical standards'. So that council with very limited powers has made Preston, I'd say, having been there a few times, a more vibrant, socially just place, despite not having much money to spend.

One of the questions the book opens up is, if you're canny in local government, can you find ways to do radical things that maybe central government didn't intend you to do? On the Greater London Council under Ken Livingstone, John McDonnell, who was then only in his 20s, was effectively running the money, he was the kind of Chancellor for London. McDonnell found all kinds of little grey areas in local government legislation that enabled them to raise lots of money for radical causes. Some of those loopholes have been shut now. But I think smart people in local government, Andy Burnham, obviously, is another one, are finding ways to expand their powers that central government didn't anticipate. And often that kind of radicalism in local government is quite popular with voters, because they feel it's standing up for their city. A lot of people like Andy Burnham, or like Ken Livingstone in London, weren't necessarily even particularly left-wing, but they just thought 'They're cheeky, they're intelligent, they've got the best interests of Manchester or London or Bristol at heart'. So there's a possibility, maybe, in local government for the left, that maybe doesn't exist in the same way in national government, where you're suddenly dealing with the right-wing press and so on. I think in local government, you can do things a bit more under the radar.

**Andrew -** Preston is a really good example of that, I agree. We've had Matthew Brown come and speak in Bristol a few times about cities and about towns and about making change happen. I think Ken Livingstone's introduction of the congestion charge was a major step forward in showing what a local authority could do, not just in terms of raising revenue, but actually making life better for people, increasing public transport, although that was later a problem with the law in some areas. But it shows what you can do at a local level.

I think one of the examples you give in the book, which I'd forgotten about, but nonetheless is very important, was about that ability to find money to fund socially just work, a massive increase in cultural programming, for example, reaching areas that hadn't been reached for a long time, or if ever.

**Andy -** Absolutely. One thing that fascinated me was in the Greater London Council in the 80s, they gave lots of money to community bodies, to ethnic minorities, to women's groups, gay groups. And that was at the time very controversial. It was described as “loony” by the right-wing press. And if you look at the material that was promoting that work then, if you look at it now, it's like something that you would get from a primary school or from the HR department of a company, that idea that diversity is essentially good, that's really become quite mainstream, even the Conservative Party are very proud of the fact that they have an ethnically diverse cabinet.

They were able through this clever financial management to get money for radical causes. And also they paid close attention to who actually lived in the city. And I think that's very interesting. You mentioned the congestion charge, which obviously Livingstone introduced as mayor. And when that was going to be introduced, the right-wing press said 'This is crazy, people won't like it, people love their cars'. But Livingstone had done the research, and he knew that in London, as I'm sure is the case in Bristol, quite a lot of people don't have a car, quite a lot of people who do have a car don't drive very often.

So actually, you can assemble a coalition of people who want to have less congestion and less pollution more easily than the right-wing press anticipated. I think when people on the left are canny, they think, 'Who are the people we're dealing with here? Let's forget the press caricature, but who actually lives in this city or this locality we're trying to run? And let's pay attention to what they really want and the patterns of how they're living.' And I think the people in the book, Benn was the same, very interested in how are people actually living? How do we attune our politics to that? Let's not go along with the standard view of what British people like, that they're rather conservative and so on. Let's look at what they're really like. I think, again, there's often more opportunity there than people on the left think.

**Andrew -** One of the problems that a city like Bristol has, which Livingstone didn't have, was we have a pretty woeful public transport system. Livingstone might not have been happy with some of the public transport system he had, but he had a functioning underground, buses, and so on. We don't have that. I think that's been one of the problems the mayor has had in Bristol, in terms of introducing new transport systems, and the sheer level of investment needed is just too huge at the moment. One of the problems with the left in cities, it tends to build up votes in big cities, which can often skew the rest of the country, doesn't it? You win the battle of the big cities, the red areas, but can't seem to win the towns.

**Andy -** Yeah, I think that's a big problem. If you look at the election in 2019, particularly, Labour did very well in Bristol, in London, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, even, actually Glasgow not so well because of the SNP. But I think that is a problem. And I think it's a massive problem of politics more widely, which is that cities become culturally and economically more and more dominant, their populations are growing. But they concentrate votes. London in the 80s had more Conservative seats than Labour seats. And London in the time that I've lived in the city, 30 years, has become a much more left of centre city, which is in some ways good. But if you think about it in electoral terms, a lot of those left of centre voters used to live in other parts of the country where they voted Labour. Now they're all in London.

Where I live in Hackney, when Diane Abbott became the MP in 1987, the Labour majority was 6 or 7,000. It's 35,000 now. So in some ways, that's great. But in some ways, electorally, that's disastrous. And there's a danger. And you see this happening in the US as well, that cities become, broadly speaking, more liberal. And even quite wealthy people will vote for left of centre parties and cities. But then it leaves a very electorally efficient scattering of right-wing voters across the rest of the country that can effectively outvote the cities, especially under our electoral system, where the constituency boundaries are drawn up according to how many people on the register, not how many people who live there. I don't know how it is in Bristol, but there are parts of London with enormous populations with only one MP, because loads of people aren't even registered to vote. So there's a tension between cultural and economic privilege and political privilege. And in lots of ways, the cities have less power politically than they should, even though the press will tell you generally the opposite.

**Andrew -** I agree with that. Bristol's an interesting example, because it's got a new constituency for the next election: it'll have five MPs rather than four. But it's not so long ago that we had Conservative MPs in Bristol, William Waldegrave was a Bristol MP, Charlotte Leslie was a Bristol Conservative MP. But the big shift now is predominantly Labour, with a very strong Green Party, may become the largest party on the council after the local elections coming up. But also, they're pushing very hard for their second Green MP here as well.

**Andy -** Yeah, absolutely. And something that may well happen in the local elections, but also the general election, is that the Green Party may do much better than they did in the Corbyn era, because a lot of people who are on the Green side quite liked Labour's radical Green policies under Corbyn and McDonnell. And now that Starmer's rowed back on some of that, some of those people may well peel away. And if you're in the Green Party, that's fantastic, but it may not be good for Labour electorally. There was a very interesting poll a few weeks ago that showed that there's 50 seats in the country where Labour are going to do worse next time than they did in 2019. Now, generally speaking, those are seats that Labour will still win. But it's a sign of how, if you like, some of the greener, more radical voters that Corbyn drew in, are now being effectively driven out of Labour. And that may not matter at all for Labour at the next general election. But the election after that, it may well be a big problem.

**Andrew -** Just talk about the difference you see between 2017 and 2019. You had this big surge in 2017. Much to the surprise of most of us I think, the result was a hung parliament. And then, two years later, when the country was facing even more challenges than it was in 2017, there was a large defeat. The Labour campaign seemed so much more tired. The manifesto wasn't as exciting, for example. And there didn't seem to be a belief that 2017 was to be built on.

**Andy -** I think it's really tantalising, because I agree with you to an extent that I think the 2017 campaign was better. But actually, in some ways, the two were quite similar. Both the manifestos are quite a similar length. The Labour campaign both times was a bit uncoordinated with different people shooting off in different directions, Corbyn doing his thing in one place, McDonnell somewhere else. I think in a way, the change was more contextual than in 2017, Corbyn was a novelty for a lot of voters. In 2019, he'd had two years of pretty brutal press treatment. So a lot of his flaws have been exposed, a lot of smears had been applied to his persona.

And of course, Brexit was in the background. I think that Brexit was a very good way to unite right of centre voters. I'm not saying everybody who voted for Brexit was on the right, but broadly they were. I think that massively increased the Conservative vote in 2019, which was a huge problem for Labour. I think without Brexit, even with all the flaws of Labour's campaign in 2019, you might have ended up with another hung parliament or something quite close to it. But by 2019, Labour in some ways were tired. Corbyn himself was tired. There'd been all kinds of controversies during his leadership. He'd been worn down.

Something a Conservative election agent said to me about 2017 really stuck in my mind. He said in 2017, when he was going around campaigning for the Tories in Kent, which was an area he'd worked in for decades, Tory voters on the doorstep were saying, 'We don't like all the anti-Corbyn coverage in the papers. We think it's bullying. We don't like him, but we don't think he's a Soviet agent. We don't think he's an anti-Semite. We think he's a decent misguided man.' So in 2017, this agent told me the negative stuff against Corbyn actually backfired with a lot of voters. Whereas in 2019, in a way, the same criticism worked very effectively, people even on the left or the centre left went along with a lot of that discourse about Corbyn. I think in a way it shows the danger, if you like, of overexposure. It's like Corbyn was just in the news constantly for two or three years and people got a bit bored of him.

I think also people thought in 2019, Labour are proposing so much change, they were just weary after Brexit, after the Scottish independence referendum, after the elections in '15 and '17. I think a lot of voters just wanted a bit of a breather. And what Labour was saying in 2019 was, 'We will come in and we will change everything'. And although I might think that's quite exciting, that's because I'm a political person. A lot of people just thought, 'Oh, I want a break'. And the whole get Brexit done thing, which the Tories promoted, which was obviously deeply deceitful, but it spoke to a desire that some people had to just get a lot of this turbulent stuff over with. It was an anti-politics vote, whereas Corbyn was offering politics on steroids and some people just didn't want it.

**Andrew -** You've given the example in the book of the rollout of free broadband, and that a lot of people didn't believe that.

**Andy -** Exactly. Labour had this policy in 2019 where they said the state will basically pay for broadband for people. And on the face of it, it was a very good policy. Lots of people are struggling with the cost of living and all kinds of socially isolated people would benefit a great deal from not having to pay for broadband. But they dropped the policy without really doing the groundwork. The policy itself probably would have worked, but they didn't prepare people. It appeared as a novelty. And the Labour press people only heard that the policy was going to come out a day or two before. And so the press was sceptical. Lots of people just didn't believe it would really happen. And in a way, it was tragic, because if we think of what's happened now to people's domestic bills, if everyone had free broadband, a lot of very isolated people during the pandemic would have really benefited from free broadband. But the policy was just presented in a hurry. And a lot of stuff happened in 2019 in a hurry.

We shouldn't forget that Labour didn't want there to be an election in 2019. It was brought forward very cynically by Boris Johnson in a big rush as part of his whole let's get Brexit in through the back door policy. I think had the election happened a couple of years later, which is what Corbyn and McDonnell and so on were hoping for and planning for, Labour might have done quite a bit better. By that point, Johnson would have no longer been a novelty. Brexit would have probably seemed like much less of a good idea than it seemed earlier. In a way, Labour were put on the spot in 2019. And there was, if you like, the Corbyn project was very flawed. But it was judged, I'd argue, in quite a premature way then, I think.

**Andrew -** There were two things, I think, which were major problems, weren't there? Antisemitism and dealing with antisemitism. And the second was this idea of, and it's an old argument, about whether the left can be patriotic, and you've had this problem that Labour have had for a long time, going right back to Kinnock, about defence of the country, and unilateral nuclear disarmament and support for CND. But what's your view now, these few years on about those two main issues? First of all, about antisemitism and Labour?

**Andy -** I felt this at the time, and I feel it even more strongly now, that Corbyn did not handle the controversy well. He himself had decades of work as an anti-racist campaigner. He'd done a tremendous amount of work against antisemitism in the House of Commons, sponsoring early day motions and so on for decades before he became leader. I think he was so astonished and outraged that he could be accused of being an antisemite himself, and of being soft on antisemitism in the party, that he never quite found the right language to admit fault, but also to keep it in perspective. A fascinating comparison is when Bernie Sanders was running for the Democratic presidential nomination. There was a period during the Black Lives Matter movement where Sanders used some language about Black Lives Matter that wasn't racist but it was slightly old-fashioned. And there was a murmuring that he didn't get it. And Sanders's campaign put some footage up online of Sanders being arrested on a Civil Rights March in the 60s. And that made the whole thing go away, because Sanders didn't say, 'I'm perfect'. He said, 'Just don't forget, I was there for you a long time ago'. And Corbyn's people never made a similar move where they said, 'Do you realise that even before he became an MP, he was organising against the National Front and other antisemitic bodies in London, and that a lot of Corbyn's political mentors were Jewish, a lot of his closest allies were Jewish'. That doesn't mean he was above criticism, but he didn't play his stronger cards, I would argue. And then he became increasingly enmeshed in thinking, 'Oh, these organisations are attacking me, they're just doing it in bad faith', and didn't reassure Jewish people sufficiently. Because there are antisemites in the Labour Party, there were under Corbyn, it's a big party, and there are antisemitic people everywhere.

Now, if you look at the really serious independent research, and I've included some of this in the book, there's strong evidence that there are fewer antisemites in the Labour Party than in most other parties. And in a way that makes sense, because people in Labour tend to be a bit more pro-identity politics, they often have an anti-racist background, but Corbyn didn't handle it well. And I think he never escaped the charge, it just dragged him down throughout his leadership and particularly in the 2019 campaign. But I feel frustration, because I feel like he could have handled it better and the damage would have been less.

On the question of patriotism, in a way, he got into a similar tangle that he allowed patriotism during his leadership to be defined by the right, so it was all about the monarchy, and the Battle of Britain, and a quite militarised view of what Britain is. Now, I'm not a monarchist, and although my dad was a soldier, I'm not particularly pro-military, but I recognise those are powerful strands in how Britain thinks about itself. But there's also another strand, which is a much more egalitarian, less hierarchical version of Britishness, which goes right back to radicals during the Civil War, the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, and so on. And that's something that Benn drew on, for a lot of his politics. I think Corbyn, and a lot of people on the left now, don't draw sufficiently on that, that they say, 'OK, yes, the Second World War is very important in our history, but do you realise who organised a war effort? It wasn't just Churchill, it was Clement Attlee, and it was the trade unions.' I think the left hasn't done that well in saying there's a right-wing Britain, and there's a left-wing Britain, and they're both Britain and they're both legitimate. I think Starmer now, with all the Union Jack iconography that he uses, that looks like a backdrop to GB News. I think it's mistaken, because there's nothing wrong with the Union Jack, but that's not the only thing that Britain is. I think a lot of people, particularly from ethnic minorities, still find that iconography very uncomfortable.

I quite like this football analogy, it's almost like the left allow the patriotism thing to be like an away fixture, where it's all played on the other side's terms. Corbyn, I think, and other people on the left, could have done better to say, 'OK, Britain's got a complicated cultural and historical lineage, with all kinds of views within it, and they're all part of who we are'. Corbyn was constantly accused of being anti-patriotic, which in lots of ways is outrageous. He's a sort of semi-pacifist. There's a huge pacifist history in Britain, going right back through the Second World War, the First World War, the Crimean War and so on. That's part of Britishness. And yet he was presented as foreign, because he wasn't pro-military. And he told me that actually, when he met people from the military and veterans, they were often very friendly to him, but that wasn't how the press presented it.

**Andrew -** Caroline Lucas has just written an interesting book on the radical Englishness. And I think that's the beginning of a debate that we need to have. It's not a new debate, in fact, but it's something which I think we can begin to work around in terms of looking at this more radical nature of what makes England and Britain, what makes the England and Britain of today.

**Andy -** I agree. I've not read the book but I've read about it. And it's a very interesting contribution. I agree that those things have been squeezed out of the narrative. Something Tariq Ali, who's a veteran lefty from the 60s, who was involved with Corbyn later, said to me, which has always stuck in my mind, he said that 'Whenever there's a vote in the House of Commons about a war or military action, you look at how many MPs vote against. At best, it's often like a dozen, except during Iraq where the rebellions were bigger, but it's not many. Whereas if you look at the proportion of the population who are basically pacifists, it's 20 or 30%.' So those people are very underrepresented in Parliament. You might think pacifists are misguided. I don't think I'm a total pacifist myself, but why don't those 20 or 30% get some similar number of MPs or newspapers speaking up for them? They don't. I think that more radical Englishness or radical Britishness is often quite underrepresented in politics and in the media, and that's a problem.

**Andrew -** It's certainly something we're planning to pursue over the next few years in terms of our work. One of the things you always get when you read about, particularly about the left, is the sheer amount of hard work it is. The endless patience, the campaigning, the reading, trying to build alliances where you can. And this idea that this is a journey, that there may not be a final end point, which I think is an important point. It's a bit like searching for utopia. It's the journey actually, rather than building the utopia in the end, which is where you achieve things. But it does remind me of the Oscar Wilde slight dismissal of socialism, that the problem of socialism is it involves too many evenings. How do you keep going? How do these five keep going?

**Andy -** I think that's such a good question. In a way, that's one of the things at the heart of the book is these five, with the exception of Benn, were often successful young, and then for almost their entire middle-age, were out on the margin. So how did they not go mad? How did they not give up? I think some of it is to do with what your frame of reference is. If you talk to Corbyn about how things are going for the left, he'll say, 'Oh, well, a good friend of mine has just become president of Mexico, or look at the elections in Bolivia that have just happened.' So one way is to look at the world and to say there are defeats in one place, there are victories in another. I think another way is to laugh at your enemies a bit. And Corbyn and Benn, both of them, in private, could be very funny about the absurdity of the *Daily Mail* in their view, or the *Telegraph* saying the same old thing about me again. So it's almost to see the powerful as a bit silly, a bit stuck.

I think it's difficult. It's very, very difficult to just keep at it. It can become an addiction, just addressing meetings, going from meeting to meeting. All the people in the book are constantly addressing meetings, often several in an evening. I guess there's a buzz from that. But it's very hard. And there are points in the story that I tell, which covers 50 or 60 years, where you feel like these five people, the five searchers, are in a tiny little heretical sect with virtually no converts at all. And there are other points where you think they're about to take over the country. And in a way, that's the dramatic interest in the book.

But I think it's very hard to survive all that time. And I worry now, with politics having become quite accelerated and quite impatient, there's a lot of good young left-wing Labour MPs, but will they have the stamina to do this for 40 or 50 years and to take the victories where they can? I'm not doing them down, but it's a difficult question. And even deeper than how does the left do this, the book's asking, 'What is politics? What is it to be political, to have your life consumed by politics?' Because if nobody does this, then society can't function politically. Some people have to do this, they have to take on this role. Even though we don't necessarily always want to go out for a drink with these people, if they're just talking about the revolutionary struggle all the time, but these people are essential. So they need survival mechanisms. John McDonnell partly did it by always acting as if he was going to have power. So all through the New Labour years, John McDonnell would produce his shadow budget where he would present ideas. And very few people apart from a few journalists like me would read them. But then, of course, he ended up being shadow chancellor and suddenly his moment came. But that's how he maintained it. He almost acted as if power might come and you should always be ready. But you've got to be quite tough to do that, I think.

**Andrew -** Well, Andy Beckett, thank you so much for joining me today. *The Searchers* is published by Allen Lane. It's highly recommended and is out now. Thank you very much, Andy.