

**Transcript of diary of Frank Cousins, 3 Oct 1959 - 29 Apr 1960 (MSS.282/8/1/1)
(punctuation added or amended in some places)**

Oct 3rd 1959. Just returned from San Francisco (AFL-CIO)¹ to take part in the General Election campaign. Apparently a very high degree of optimism has been developed during the last few weeks with a great deal of satisfaction being expressed about the line of policies being pursued and a general approval of the leadership being given by Hugh Gaitskell & Nye Bevan. According to reports the television broadcasts of the Labour Party have gone over very well & the Labour candidates are now sensing a narrow but convincing victory. Page 1

This is very pleasing to me & I hope they are correct. A small doubt enters my mind when I remember the lack of enthusiasm in the parliamentary party during the preceding [sic] months & that even Hugh & Nye have not registered any real hope of winning power but have been rather more concerned to establish that the other would be regarded as the basic reasons [sic] for losing the election if this should happen.

However, we shall see & in the meantime the election campaign must be fulfilled. The programme arranged for me covers Edinburgh, Glasgow, Liverpool, Blackburn, Rawtenstall, Burton, Connahs Quay & Belper. Covering lots of marginal seats with prospects of keen meetings particularly in Liverpool where I am [?to] work with Bessie Braddock & Harold Wilson, Blackburn where Barbara Castle's seat is in danger, also Tony Greenwood who expresses doubts about being able to retain in [sic] seat.

Irene White at Shotton (Connahs Quay) is also under real attack from the steel interests who have stepped up their anti-nationalisation campaign. Finally in Burton there is an attempt to win a seat with Eddie McGarry (good fighter but just possibly not the right choice for very conservative Burton on T) & George Brown for whom I always do a meeting. Page 2

Oct 11 1959. The campaigning is over, the election held & the Tories are back in with an increased majority (100). It became evident soon after the results started to come in on Thursday night that Labour was not going to win the election. Although the pattern was not uniform it appeared that any swing which was taking place in Scotland, Wales, Lancashire & the N/West would be insufficient to counter the drift to the Tories in the Midlands, South & South West.

During my tour the enthusiasm remained high & in justification for my feelings on this we can say that we won seats in Scotland, increased majorities for Harold Wilson & Barbara Castle, held the seat at Shotton despite the attack from the steel employers although equally we did not win at Burton & majorities were reduced at Rawtenstall & Belper.

There will be need for careful analysis of the results before comments are made although we are already getting opinions from everyone on how we went [?astray].

Oct 18 1959. Whilst it was desirable that time should pass & balanced reasoning be used in an assessment of the election failure, apparently Page 3

¹ American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

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that is not to happen. Already the right wing group of the Labour Party are expressing themselves & trying to apportion blame. Douglas Jay, who is regarded in many places as frequently expressing in public the views of Hugh Gaitskell in a kind of "trying out" basis, has written an article in the current issue of "Forward" expressing the view that the Party must remove its "first two fatal handicaps" "the class image & the myth of nationalisation".

The more reactionary press are quite jubilant about this & praising the wisdom of Douglas Jay. There will inevitably be a reaction from the trade unions., the constituency parties & the M.P.s who are not associated with the intelligentsia & university economist groups.

My feeling is that D Jay has done us all a disservice [sic] but I hope we can also recognise that he is only expressing publicly views which have been known to be held for a long time by some of the leadership of the party including Hugh Gaitskell, Patrick Gordon Walker, Tony Crosland, Roy Jenkins & Douglas Jay himself. Most of the Party policy statements during the past 3 years have tended to display that kind of thinking, particularly those on industry & society, control of industry & education. We are probably running into a bad period & I hope the unions & their leaders can retain their balance.

Nov 7th 1959. There is still an atmosphere prevalent at the T.U.C. that it is necessary for us to display to the country our "responsibility & statesmanship". The recent attitude in the national press of describing all strikes as "wildcat" strike[s] is having an effect on some members of the General Council. They are wanting to institute investigations & prepare reports. My feelings as expressed to our T.U.C. colleagues is that we should not become involved in this as it is only playing into the hands of the enemies of the trade union movement. I am afraid however they will go ahead with it, influenced to some extent by the strikes at British Oxygen Company & Morris Motors Oxford. How the Tories in high places must laugh at us. T & G.W.U. have just been involved in an unofficial strike at the Transport dept Sheff[?ield]. Sympathies are to some extent with the men as one know[s] that the national leadership in the section from A. Townsend is never very clear or progressive. I have encouraged him to adopt the idea that he is an important figure in the industrial negotiations field but it doesn't work satisfactorily simply because he hasn't got it. Nevertheless we have not been able to make that dispute official because the men refused to accept GEC guidance. Page 4

The right v left comments from individuals in the labour movement continues. They don't seem to realise that we shall be having a conference shortly & that would be the best place to talk. The press and television keep trying to get me to comment but I have no desire.

Nov 23rd 1959. The executive of the ITF² has been held in Rome & we are running up against several problems. Africa & its desire for emancipation is really catching up with us & proposals are now being made for a boycott of South African goods. Page 5

² International Transport Workers' Federation

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This will no doubt be considered at the ICTFU³ in Dec (Brussels) [sic], but I'm not sure that our British representatives realise the extent of the problem, particularly having regard to the attitude of the American trade unions on the question of Pan Africanism which they favour.

Another problem is likely to be the attitude of the American seamen's unions to the question of flags of convenience. Two years ago I told Tom Yates to clarify this with the Americans because it was obvious they were thinking solely in terms of protecting the jobs of American seamen. This issue will shortly have to be faced & Tom is now beginning to see it.

Last night a number of union leaders including Bill Carron, Tom Williamson, Sidney Green (NUR), Bill Webber & myself met Hugh Gaitskell & Nye Bevan for dinner & a talk at the Euston Hotel. This is the first time I had seen either of them since the election & I was looking forward to seeing how things were working out, particularly now that Nye has become the deputy leader of the Party. Hugh has I believe been seeing some of the T.U leaders quite a lot during the past months but not so with me.

Nov 23rd 1959. The first noticeable thing was that the election has left its mark on Hugh. He seems tired & older but perhaps this will only be a passing phase.

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A disturbing thing is that the two of them do not appear to have anything in common. Whilst the meeting was not in any way an "inquest" on the election, obviously we could not avoid talking around it. Hugh feels that nationalisation was a vote loser at the polls. Nye thinks it was a vote winner when tackled boldly. Says if it lost votes anywhere it was because we shied away from it. Hugh says association with T.U.s did not effect [sic] results. Nye disagrees & says we will never make real progress whilst we have a man like Tewson, who is completely non-political, at the head of T.U.C. Also says unions should give more money to Party & allow some of it to be spent at discretion of Parliamentary Party leaders. The conference is to be held at Blackpool next Saturday & Sunday 28/29 Nov. & it shook to me to hear that the three speakers from the Party i.e. Barbara Castle as chairman, Hugh leading in the debate & Nye winding up are preparing their respective papers in isolation & no one knows what they are intending to say. How daft can we all become?

25 Nov 1959. I have seen Morgan Phillips & he confirms this, even he has no idea what the speakers are intending to say!

Dec 6th 1959. The Labour Party conference is over & as expected it resolved itself into a clash between those who feel we lost the election because we turned away from real socialism & those who feel we should cater for a new class of voters who don't think of themselves as workers & don't want any more ? nationalisation. Barbara Castle made a very good speech on an old time socialist basis to open the conference & we dragged our way through some sections of the report.

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³ International Confederation of Free Trade Unions

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Hugh Gaitskell gave a very balanced report of how he saw the general election in retrospect & expressed ideas for the future. Much of it was in the form of a lecture to a class of advanced students. The main purpose was however to display a belief that the electorate do not want any more public ownership, that we must appeal to the electorate on a middle of the road basis & that we must rewrite certain sections of the constitution, particularly in so far as we are committed to a policy of public ownership of the means of production & distribution. An attempt was made to suggest that we are regarded by the electorate as the party who intend to nationalise everything. This is ridiculous particularly in the light of the policy statements the Party have issued during the past 3 years in which we have almost apologised for our previous beliefs in nationalisation.

An attack on Hugh's statement & policy was immediately Dec 6th 1959 made by Michael Foot & it was evident that battle stations were being taken. Benn Levy joined in & then we had a backward & forwards debate which became very desultory at time[s]. Conf. adjourned & opened again on Sunday on the same subject. After about an hour I spoke in the debate & expressed concern at some aspects of Hugh's speech, particularly on the attempt to discard the principle of public ownership. I expressed the view that we couldn't have socialism without public ownership & felt Hugh should not have said this without his executive being consulted. Conference livened up here because all the right wing supporters of Hugh from within the Party & the unions rushed in to his defence. They didn't make much impression & conference almost settled down into lethargy again. Page 8

When Nye got up to wind up the debate it appears [sic] to be an impossible task but he dealt with it in masterly fashion, spending the first few minutes in a light hearted vein & restoring conference to a good humour. He then built up the case for more socialism, more moral thinking & a restoration of the belief that our philosophies were worthwhile. In all his long career [sic] he has probably never made a more important or better speech. Nothing has been resolved but he has helped to give us time to seek solutions to the problems. It is however now publically apparent that our two leaders have nothing in common.

I like to feel that the talk I had with Nye on Saturday afternoon helped him by showing that we believed in him. Dec 6th 1959. It was a treat to be able to visit our Oxford Pressed Steel branch on Friday the 4th & to mix again with real trade unionists who still believe in themselves & their ability to do some of the things which still need to be done. Page 9

There has been a lot of pressure lately from the left wing of the Labour Party asking me to go into parliament & to challenge Hugh for the leadership. They seem to be surprised when I tell them I have no desire to be in the House nor wish to be the leader. I really want to help a leader by using our trade union beliefs to establish socialism. Very grave doubts are in my mind as to whether Hugh Gaitskell has either the wish or the fire to achieve that.

I have met our own group in the House of C[ommons] & am

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encouraging them to take a more active part in affairs. Have also offered them closer co-operation unionwise to provide briefs on union & industrial matters.

Dec 24th. General Council are going ahead with enquiry into strikes. Our union is not given [sic] evidence on basis that enquiry is impractical & can serve no useful purpose.

The "Forward" continues to display its anti-Frank Cousins attitude. This is surprising & silly as we are the largest bulk purchasers of the paper. No reason for us to continue to pay to be attacked!

Jan 6th 1960.

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We have just had a very hectic visit to Northern Ireland to open the new regional office at Belfast. Nance went with me & as usual time was fully occupied with civic meetings & meetings with members at Lurgan & Belfast. The new office is a magnificent building, contemporary & effective at the same time. We have promised these premises since before the war & I am glad that we have now been able to do this. With the new offices in Regions 2 & 3 plus the new office at Drummond Street London we are making headway with this great problem of rehousing the union.

The union is playing its part in the new struggle for the shorter working week & improved wages for our members & I feel sure that good offices help the officers of the union to do the job better for the members.

Nye Bevan has had to undergo a major surgical operation & for a time his condition gave cause for anxiety. There is some secrecy about the nature of the complaint which has called for the "major abdominal operation". There has been a denial of the suggestion that it was cancer & reports now indicate an improvement in his condition. We are all hoping for a speedy recovery both for personal & party reasons. It would be a tragedy if anything happened to Nye.

Hugh is in the West Indies on a holiday tour.

Jan 20th 1960. Nye has had a relapse & his position is causing grave anxiety. Jenny is staying permanently at the hospital & we are hoping that things are not so bad as they sound. So is [sic] sad to see this great champion of socialism out of the battle at the time when he is so sorely needed.

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Barbara Castle has suggested that I might meet Dick Crossman & some other NEC colleagues to see what we are to do arising from Nye's illness. I have rejected this & suggested we wait for Nye to be with us (that is heartfelt).

In the industrial side we have had an unofficial strike at BRS arising from the new agreement on the 30 MPH. It arises mainly in London, Midlands & N East but most of them are now back at work. An ill-advised dispute attempting to protect local agreements of a doubtful character.

Problems are developing in the passenger transport field and in the railway services. An unofficial strike of NUR members is threatened.

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Jan 21. Nye's condition is slightly better tonight although he is gravely ill yet.

I am leaving for India on behalf of T.U.C tomorrow.

Feb 6th 1960. My visit to India was curtailed. Mother died on 27th Jan & I heard of this in Calcutta on the 29th. Came straight home to be with Dad. The funeral took place in Doncaster on 1 Feb 1960. All the children were there & dad was very broken up. It is a sad loss for us because although mother was 78 and beginning to be rather frail she was undoubtedly the strong character which bound the family together. Dad has decided for the moment to live with George & Vi. I think this is best for him but I have told George that Dad musn't [sic] be a burden to anyone, he can come to us anytime he wishes to do so. Page 12

Work has collected me again. The T.U.C have taken a hand in the threatened railway strike called by the NUR to take place as from 15th Feb. The basic caused [sic] declared by the NUR is that their members need a wage increase but the problem goes much deeper. It is a combination of all sorts of things. One is that the railway leaders allowed themselves to be bribed out of our London Bus struggle in May 1958 by the granting of a 3% wage increase to railwaymen & the offer of a pay enquiry (that has taken 16 months to complete its job & the men are now restive). Secondly there is a great deal of friction between the railway unions, particularly as ASLEF & TSSA are thinking of widening the differentials in favour of their members.

(Separate file of notes on the period 4/2/60 to 12.2.60).

12.3.60. Off work for 3 weeks with throat infection. Dr advises that I am working to[o] hard without any relaxation. Should ease up. Page 13

26.3.60. Labour Party NEC gave consideration to revision of Party aims. However much subsequent events are used to disguise this, it has become an attempt on the part of Hugh Gaitskell & his intimates in the Labour and trade union fields to create in the minds of the electorate, particularly the "reform" type of person, the idea that the Labour Party has abandoned its belief in nationalisation as a basic & essential part of a socialist economy.

They are determined to sacrifice our principals for the sake of securing an election victory. The importance of this move is that the particular group of politicians of the Gaitskell, Crossland [sic], Wyatt, Jay, Callaghan, Gordon Walker type are really trying to secure the removal from the constitution of the Labour Party the reference to those aspects of policy in which they do not have any belief.

They are reformists with a main purpose of secure [sic] politically power for themselves, quite satisfied to maintain the existing structure of society with kindly alterations.

We as a union oppose the suggested revision of Clause 4 of the LP. Constitution & Harry Nicholas as a member of the NEC did a splendid job of work at the meeting. A revised document was eventually agreed at NEC level & will be placed before the next conference. Harry maintained his opposition right through & final voting was 22 to 1.

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26.3.60. The nonsense of the present position is that the revised statement of the aims of the party can now be read to mean "all things to all people". Newspaper comments have varied between describing this as a "Victory for the left wing" round to those who say L. Party has now abandoned public ownership. One thing is sure – it is another major blunder by Gaitskell. He apparently didn't see that he couldn't get away with such a reactionary proposal. He obviously has no idea of rank & file trade union reactions on such matters.

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The Tory press will of course play this up to all eternity as & when it suits them. They are already again playing up the line of "Cousins again shows he has no confidence in Gaitskell line" sort of thing. When will he learn that some trade union leaders do keep contact with their members & are in a position to talk for them?

Another real showdown is coming about defence policies but he hasn't apparently seen that either.

29.3.60. On the eve of our Bristol conference Mr Woodrow Wyatt fired another shot in the battle of ideas within the L Party. His comment was that the reference to public ownership was being kept in the party constitution in order to satisfy some of the old fashioned sentimentalists but that it really didn't mean anything. In such circumstances I had to comment at our conference and made clear our support for the principle of public ownership & the extension of the use of this to control the economy.

29.3.60. It was made clear that I did not regard W. Wyatt as an example of socialist M. of P. nor as a person authorised to speak on behalf of either the NEC or the trade unions. In the talk I also reported that we stood firmly by our attitude of being against the manufacture or use of nuclear weapons. On that subject I did not tell the conference that I had already raised this at the International Committee meeting of the T.U.C. on Tuesday 22 March and had suggested that we should seek a meeting with Mr Gaitskell & members of his Parliamentary Comm. responsible for defence policies, in order that we could re-examine the whole subject. I made the statement that if we did not create a joint policy statement which more closely resembled the desires of the people we should have such a policy forced forward by the votes (mandated) of the unions. Warned Alan Birch that he was likely to find himself in a difficult position at his conference at Easter (this was not received very kindly by Alan). It was finally agreed that Vincent Tewson should see H Gaitskell with a view to sounding him out on possibility of a joint meeting.

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9.4.60 The Budget has been presented. Some quite minor taxation evasion changes & an additional 2^d per packet on cigarettes. Our people should recognise that the Chancellor's speech in which he gave a warning about expenditure & import/export problems did not correspond with his taxation efforts. More will no doubt follow shortly to the disadvantage of the workers. Also not in line with electioneering speeches of Tories.

9.4.60 I.T.F ex[ecutive] meetings have been held this week. The Gen

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Sec O. Becu has been under some great pressure during the past few months to accept an invitation to become the G. Sec of ICFTU. This arises from an American-inspired attempt to get rid of "Yappy" Oldenbrook as G S of ICFTU. Yappy is certainly not the easiest of persons to get on with but he is very capable & I do not feel ICFTU is justified in getting rid of him. However Omar has said he intends to stay with ITF.

There is a problem regarding staffing & location of headquarters. Omar would favour transfer from London to Brussels [sic] (he is Belgian & his family are married & over there). Executive are not opposed to the change & would unanimously approve subject to agreement with management committee (i.e. Tom Yates, Bill Webber, Sid Green & Doug Tennant). Tom Yates was at the meeting of E.C. & already agrees. Omar to meet the committee as soon as poss so that EC proposal can be placed before Berne Congress.

16.4.60. Met Sir Patrick Hennessy of Fords at his flat to discuss the "agreement" he has reached with AEU⁴ & NUGMW⁵ re separate & less expensive wages & conditions agreement covering the new plant which the company are to develop on Merseyside. Suggested to Sir P. that this would not be acceptable to other unions & that he should reconsider his position & put the subject back for discussion at the National Negotiating Committee at Fords.

16.4.60 Apparently some union leaders are prepared to buy their way into the new factories by agreeing to things which cannot work. Some employers will no doubt favour doing business with Bill Carron, who is willing to be tolerant & co-operative as well as being anti C[ommunist] P[arty]. Somehow they don't seem to accept that one can be militant & still remain pro labour and social democrat. Sir P. has agreed to consider the things I said & then meet me again etc.

26.4.60 Dad has died. We attended his funeral yesterday and it was an awful repeat of the funeral of Mum 12 weeks ago. We saw him 3 weeks ago & he appeared to have lost the will to carry on. Not to be wondered at really as he & mum had been married for just over 60 years & he was now very lonely.

29.4.60. We have had the Gen Council of the T.U.C at which consideration was again given to the problem of the E[lectrical] T[rades] Union. The Finance and General Purposes Comm. of the T.U.C. had proposed that we should advise the E.T.U. they must either take legal action against their critics or accept a judicial enquiry. Alternatively they would be suspended with a view to expulsion. I opposed this on the basis that it would be impractical to suspend the ETU. Many of the unions have to work with them. Would start an inter-union conflict which would adversely effect [sic] the members, with whom we have no quarrel. E.T.U leadership are acting stupidly but this is no reason for us also being foolish. Proposal to suspend carried by 20 votes to 5.

⁴ Amalgamated Engineering Union

⁵ National Union of General and Municipal Workers

29.4.60. USDAW⁶ conference has gone on record as in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament. This is a further proof of the view we have been putting before the L. Party & T.U.C.

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Now reported that T.U.C. & L. Party are to meet to re-examine the defence problem. This has been helped by the defence debate in the House of Commons on the decision by the Govt to abandon the "Blue Streak" project. It is becoming increasingly obvious to even the most rigid supporters of the "deter[r]ent" idea that we have not had either a deter[r]ent or a means of delivery of such a weapon for years & cannot have for some years ahead, although we have been pretending to defend ourselves by this means. This means obviously that if we can manage for years without participating in this crazy scramble for power through weapons then we can continue to do without it. George Brown MP made a powerful speech in the debate & made it clear the L.P. would be rethinking its defence position. I had already had a talk with George some days before the debate & convinced him of the nonsense of present party policy. Glad he has made this contribution. As usual Gaitskell was away although he arranged the timing of the debate. Since he heard of debate H Gaitskell has said the contents were in line with his views? & by agreement with him. Strangely enough we have just had a card from George (in Strasbourg) & he says he didn't consult with anyone as there was no one to consult. I know who I would rather believe. Apparently HG & G. Brown had rowed. George accused him in front of the Parliamentary Party of being a "chiseller". Doesn't withdraw from that view.

⁶ Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers