

The Clandestine Caucus: a minor update

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I researched and wrote *The Clandestine Caucus* (listed on the website as CC) in the years following the publication of *Smear! Wilson and the Secret State*. It continued that book's exploration of role of the spooks in British politics, with an interest in the history of the Tory right triggered by the arrival of Mrs Thatcher. And I was interested in Labour Party history. (I was a member in the 80s and 90s.) I haven't methodically revisited CC since but relevant odds and ends crop up. The latest are discussed below.

IRD, Common Cause and IRIS

At the *Declassified* site John McEvoy reported – as his essay's subtitle has it – 'A secret unit of the Foreign Office monitored leftist journalists, intellectuals and trade unions deemed "subversive" and sought to discredit them during the Cold War, recently declassified files reveal.' ¹ That unit was a hitherto barely known branch of the Information Research Department (IRD).

In 1951, a secret group named the Anti-Communist (Home) Committee was established, comprising representatives from the Foreign Office, Treasury, Home Office, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Labour, and Security Service (MI5).

Chaired by cabinet secretary Norman Brook, the committee's objective was 'to keep communist activities in this country under review and to recommend what counter-action could properly be taken'.

In June of that year, the committee recommended that a 'Home Desk' should be 'added to the Information Research Department . . . to act as the focus for the collation and dissemination of intelligence about communist activities on the home front'.

McEvoy describes some of the later concerns of the Home committee – for example the historian Eric Hobsbawm and the TV production company World In

¹ <<https://shorturl.at/qxOV7>> or <<https://www.declassifieduk.org/home-desk-the-foreign-offices-covert-propaganda-campaign-inside-britain/>>

Action. But, centrally, the committee was preoccupied with countering the activities of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in the trade unions.

McEvoy has been reading declassified files in the National Archives which are not available on-line. Fortunately, there is another detailed account of IRD's Home committee by Rory Cormac and Dan Lomas which is accessible without payment.²

Both accounts mention the Home committee's links to IRIS. McEvoy notes:

Many of these operations were conducted in association with the Industrial Research and Information Service (IRIS), an anti-communist trade union organisation which received covert funding from the British state.

In 1968, one IRD official noted how IRIS 'played a major part in the past decade in effecting the defeat of communists in various key elections in a number of unions.'

These included the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) presidential election of 1959, the Yorkshire NUM elections of 1960, and the Amalgamated Union of Foundry Workers general secretary election of 1967.

Cormack and Lomas write:

In 1957 and 1958, IRIS published two pamphlets covertly drafted by the English Desk, one on communist front organisations and the other a history of the British Communist Party. IRIS also published a monthly newsletter which 'frequently carried items leaked by Information Research Department, often on the initiative of the Security Service'.

IRIS has been discussed before in these columns, notably in *The Clandestine Caucus* in 1996. It grew out of the British version of the anti-communist organisation formed in the USA, Common Cause. In his *Anti-Communism in Britain During the Early Cold War* (University of London Press, 2023), Matthew Gerth notes:

In 1962 the Committee on Communism (Home) later classified IRIS as

² Rory Cormac and Dan Lomas, 'Research note: "a cuckoo in the diplomatic service nest": freedom of information and the "English Desk" of the Information Research Department (IRD)' at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2023.2263947>>

This essay discusses at some length the freedom of information issues involved in getting this material declassified. They note, *en passant*, 'Interestingly, the reference to IRD's domestic activity was just one of several redactions from the 2009 authorised history of the Security Service (MI5), *The Defence of the Realm*.'

the 'most useful of the anti-communist organizations, at least from the point of view of the government'. (p. 161)

The Committee on Communism (Home) is the IRD section discussed above.

Gerth's section on Common Cause is headed 'Common Cause – an American front?' and he writes:

A later [Conservative Party] Central Office report on the group classified it as 'a genuine all-party anti-communist organization' but still cautioned 'it is too early to say whether they are working on the right lines'. The memo advised that 'too many' similar organisations had 'preached only to the converted'. In the early days directly after Common Cause announced its formation, what struck the Central Office as odd was the source of the organisation's funding. It reported that 'a great many dollars are coming from America' or, put more simply, 'there are Yankee dollars behind it'. Conservative sources reported that this US-funded British pressure group intended 'to spend a considerable number of dollars over the years in this country with the purpose of combating communism'. (p. 157)

Who was providing the dollars?

Sources at the FO [Foreign Office] reported Natalie Paine – the chief American promoter for the creation of a British Common Cause – claimed the group had the direct backing of the US State Department and the approval of her close friend Walter Bedell Smith, the director of the CIA. (p. 157)³

Declassified CIA documents show CIA Director Bedell Smith meeting Paine in 1951⁴ and she wrote to the CIA's H. W. Jackson that year:

'I have had the pleasure of meeting several people connected with your agency during recent trips to Washington. However, our great mutual friend [presumably Smith], tells me that you are the one I should see

³ On Paine's friendship with Bedell Smith, Hugh Wilford notes:

'To begin with, FO officials perceived Common Cause as, to some extent, an unwelcome American intervention in British internal affairs. The organisation was only inaugurated formally in Britain after persistent agitation by the head of Common Cause USA, Natalie Paine who, it was noted somewhat uneasily, was "a close friend" of high-ranking State Department officials and the Director of Central Intelligence, Walter Bedell Smith.'

Hugh Wilford, *The CIA, the British Left and the Cold war. Calling the Tune?* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p. 68.

My thanks to Nick Must for supplying this footnote.

⁴ <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp80r01731r002600530001-9>>

relative to certain important matters I have in mind.⁵

If this isn't quite proof of CIA funding of Common Cause, it is probably as close as we are going to get.

The trail goes from Common Cause, with CIA money, into IRIS with anti-communist trade unionists and information from IRD and MI5. IRIS runs through to the mid-1970s and ends up working with Brian Crozier (CIA, IRD) and Charles Elwell (MI5).

All this state-funded anti-CPGB activity in the post-war era occurred because it was believed that the CPGB was or might become a real threat to the British state. But Professor Christopher Andrew tells us in his more or less official history of MI5 that the Security Service had known about the Soviet funding of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) – up to and including who received the bags of used notes from Soviet officials – since the early 1950s. And MI5 chose not to expose the funding. To my knowledge no-one from MI5 has ever explained this decision. It may be that MI5 was told not to expose it by its American counterparts, the FBI. They knew that the CPUSA was being funded by the Soviets because the member who acted as the Party's bagmen was an FBI informant.⁶

Had MI5 revealed the Soviet funding – after the 1956 invasion of Hungary, for example – the CPGB would have been reduced to a tiny rump. Had this occurred, little of this state-funded, anti-CPGB activity would have been necessary. How the British left would have developed without the CPGB – your speculation would be as good as mine. But as I wrote in *Clandestine Caucus*:

The Soviet connection with the CPGB enabled the Security Service to portray both unions and the left of the Labour Party, some of whom worked with the CPGB, as subversives; and with a subversive minority in its midst, this enabled the Labour Party as a whole to be portrayed as a threat to the well-being of the nation, and thus a legitimate target for MI5.

⁵ <<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp80r01731r003100130015-2>>

⁶ <<https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/byte-out-of-history-communist-agent-tells-all>>