



From the Guardian archive

From the archive, 19 January 1963: Editorial: The death of Hugh Gaitskell

To follow him cannot be easy, but he has left the Labour Party in its best form since 1950

Mon 19 Jan 2015 00.30 EST



19 3

Hugh Gaitskell's death is a personal, political, and national tragedy. He has died young, at a time when he had at least an even chance of being the next Prime Minister, and when he looked like gaining office after hard years in opposition. In Labour's ranks he leaves a gap that cannot be filled quickly - though it must be filled - for he alone of its leaders was known, trusted, and respected far beyond the party. Nationally, the tragedy is that a man of immense courage and integrity has been taken away just when he was most likely to be needed.

He would have been a better Prime Minister than Leader of the Opposition, because his talents were creative. Already, as Minister of Fuel and briefly as Chancellor of the Exchequer, he had shown his ability for organisation and administration. As Leader of the Opposition, he was more concerned with seeking constructive policies - looking towards the day when **Labour** would again be in office - than with negatively damning the Government. He was too fair-minded not to see the truth of a situation and he knew that the freedom of any Government is circumscribed by events, by its allies, and by its physical resources. He rarely, if ever, took unfair advantage of the licence that an Opposition can exploit.

Personally, too, it could be said of him that in opposition he was too kind to some of his critics within the party. He never waged the kind of personal warfare that some of his closest colleagues waged against him. In office as Prime Minister he might have changed. His construction of a Cabinet would have been uninhibited: he saw little purpose in axing "shadows," but he was determined that when it became the Government his party should give the country the strongest leadership that it could.



36,248

THE GUARDIAN

Manchester Saturday January 19 1963

Price 4d



MR GAITSKELL DEAD

End comes suddenly and peacefully

WIFE AT BEDSIDE

Mr Hugh Gaitskell, the Leader of the Opposition, died in Middlessex Hospital at 12 minutes past nine last night. Mrs Gaitskell was at the hospital.

Mr Gaitskell, who was 56, had been in hospital since January 4 with a virus infection.

The end for the Labour Party leader came suddenly and peacefully, with his wife sitting at his bedside in his private ward. The last medical statement said: "Mr Gaitskell's heart condition deteriorated suddenly and he died peacefully."

At about ten minutes past nine, Mrs Gaitskell called urgently for Dr Somerville, who had earlier arranged to sleep the night at the hospital. He was there within seconds, but it was too late. The life of Mr Gaitskell had ended.

Among the reporters waiting in a room at the hospital, word went round that something was happening. Then the Labour Party spokesman, Mr Percy Clark, ran breathless and grave-faced into the room and said: "It was sudden and peaceful."

Obituary on page 3
peacefully two minutes ago. Mrs Gaitskell was with him. Mr Gaitskell's two daughters,翠西 and Julia, were brought to the hospital.



Power failures hit the City at rush-hour

WORK-TO-RULE "IS SABOTAGE"

BY OUR INDUSTRIAL STAFF

There was no affection in the power shortage yesterday in London and the South-east. The only source of improvement until tomorrow, when the

Blizzard hits the North

200 VEHICLES IN MOORLAND DRIFTS

More than two hundred vehicles, some of them cars, are estimated to be stranded on Stainmore, Westmorland, where the A66 road has been closed after what is described as the worst blizzard for 16 years. Snowploughs are now fighting through high snowdrifts to try to get them out.

Some drivers have abandoned their vehicles and walked through the blizzard to open the gates to a moorland café. The snowdrifts are so deep that the snowploughs are unable to clear them. The A66 road was closed last night but British motorists had already isolated themselves from England.

Drivers of snowploughs struggled to keep the Bowler roads open, but driving snow hampered clearance work. Several times during the day the A66 at Carter Bar was blocked. It was closed at 11.30. A police car and a number of vehicles were waiting for snowploughs to clear the A66 between Kendal and Borethorpe.

Worshipful areas
In the bank-hill north, road conditions had changed very little over the past 24 hours. The worshipful areas across the West Country, Wales, Northern England, and almost the whole of Scotland. The Yorkshire, Pictou-Warwick road in Yorkshire, which was completely closed last night, is the day because blocked again. In parts of Lancashire A66 bridges and vehicles were being driven in their tracks in their last system and in the Lake District Windermere is now safe for skating. The snow completely covers the southern slopes for

SIX PUT OFF MOMENT OF DECISION

Debate on Britain shelved for ten days

FROM LEONARD BEATON

BRUSSELS, January 18
The French effort to suspend the negotiations for British membership of the European Economic Community failed today in the face of united opposition from the Germans, Italians, and Benelux countries.

The French Foreign Minister, M. Couve de Murville, was in effect challenged to walk out and refused to take the challenge. It was agreed finally to adjourn and take up the dispute over the French proposal for suspension at the next scheduled meeting of Ministers on January 28.

M. Jean Faut, the Belgian chairman of the conference, put out the following statement on behalf of the six and the British: "The French delegation has asked that the negotiations with Great Britain should be suspended. But the five other delegations, the EEC and the British delegation have opposed the French proposal. The discussion of this question will be continued in the next session of the conference which has been fixed for January 28 at Brussels."

"Not search our while"
When asked if the French would be taking part in any conference tomorrow, he said that there would be a working party on arrangements for handling on January 28 and a second of the Council on the Community. France would decide whether it will participate in these meetings or not.

A French spokesman, however, said: "We do not think it is worth our while to join in technical discussions between now and then. This," he pointed out, "is an indication that Article 227 of the Treaty of Rome

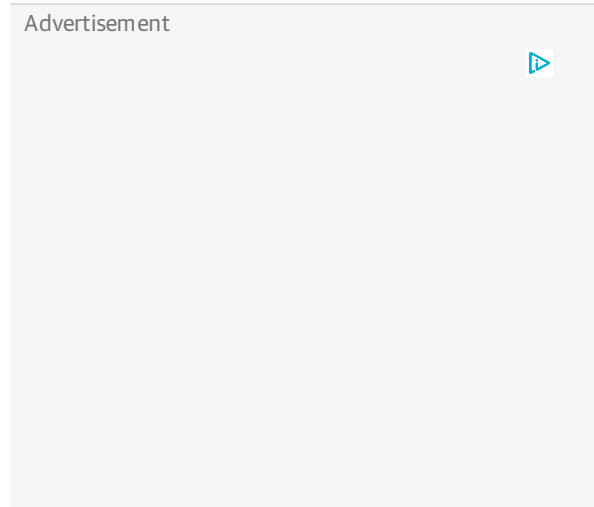
SURPRISE!

Mr Edward Heath, back from Brussels, said last night: "We have in Brussels had a meeting determined to do our utmost to settle the remaining points. There were not many, but they were important and we believed they could be negotiated successfully in a comparatively short time. I did not expect this to happen."

▲ The Guardian, 19 January 1963. Photograph: Guardian

Of his courage, the Bevanite and bomb controversies are ample evidence. To a youthful Chancellor, rapidly promoted over the heads of experienced seniors, the Bevanite campaign against him could have been unnerving. He stood his ground, and his firmness helped him to win the leadership of the party in 1955. Suez was a test from which he emerged well; but as a national leader he did not really stand out until the 1959 election. Then, in spite of one tactical error (the income tax promise), he showed the coolness and good sense that a Prime Minister must have. The loss of that

election was a disappointment, though not unexpected; it was followed by the bitterest attacks upon him from within the party, ending with the defeat of his defence policy at the Scarborough conference in 1960. He replied with the famous “fight, fight, and fight again” - for which the Left has never forgiven him - and by the long struggle to lead Labour out of the unilateralist wilderness.



His commitment to the Atlantic alliance was complete, though he sought constantly to find ways of promoting harmony between East and West. Disengagement in Europe, a lesser dependence by the West on nuclear weapons, and effective political control over the generals, were for years among the first priorities in his policy. Although he was not an early convert to the non-nuclear club, he was quick to see the danger of letting nuclear weapons spread. The coming of President Kennedy as effective leader of the Western alliance was a great satisfaction to him. The two men got on well together - better, one may surmise, than Mr Kennedy and Mr Macmillan do - and each found stimulus in the other's brisk intellect. Latterly, Cuba and the Common Market had clouded their respect for each other, but this was a passing phase. As Prime Minister, Hugh Gaitskell would have enjoyed the best of relations with the White House.

It should be said also that he was a friendly and unaffected person. He enjoyed the kind of peaceful and private family life that fortifies a man in public office.

Whoever follows him as Labour leader will have to continue along the course he has set - a non-doctrinaire approach to economic and industrial policy, a firm commitment to collective defence and multilateral disarmament and a readiness to see gradual reform of the Labour Party's structure from within. Any other course will reopen old wounds and drive away sympathetic voters. To follow him cannot be easy; but he has left the Labour Party in its best form since 1950.

An [obituary of Hugh Gaitskell](#) also appeared in the paper.

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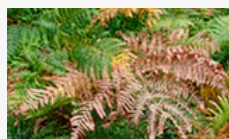
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siegmund67

19 Jan 2015 9:28

0 ↑

Gaitskell was a hopeless Opposition Leader and I seriously doubt if he could have won the 1964 election.

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JayPeeAre → **siegmund67**

0 ↑

He got more votes when he lost in 1959 than when labour won in 1964' labours vote fell by 200,000 but the Tory vote fell. Y nearly 2m between 1959-1964

He did leave the party in a great state, and 18 years later the SDP left taking 3 and a half million votes with them

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OttawaJohn

22 Jan 2015 1:10

0 ↑

Hugh Gatskill is one of those "what if" questions of History. I was a Secondary School boy with Gatskill leanings when he died, I never warmed to Harold Wilson and often wonder still if all the rumour around Gatskill's death ever had any substance.

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