

# Churchill, Clement Davies and the Ministry of Education

Edward Clement Davies (1884–1962), leader of the Liberal Party from 1945 until 1956, has been variously described as ‘an underestimated Welshman and politician’,<sup>1</sup> and as ‘one of the unknown great men of modern times’.<sup>2</sup> Davies, it is true, remains one of the most enigmatic and puzzling of twentieth-century front-line British politicians.

Born at Llanfyllin in mid-Wales in February 1884, Davies achieved brilliant academic success as an undergraduate in law at Trinity College, Cambridge, and was called to the Bar by Lincoln’s Inn in 1909. Soon afterwards, he established a highly successful and lucrative legal practice at London. He held a number of prestigious official positions after the outbreak of the First World War, and took silk at a relatively young age in 1926. Although Davies had taken a passionate interest in political life ever since boyhood, and had indeed been approached to stand as a Liberal parliamentary candidate as early as 1910, he did not stand for parliament until the ‘We Can Conquer Unemployment’ general election of 30 May 1929 when he was elected MP for his native Montgomeryshire. Thereafter he was to hold the seat continuously until his death in March 1962.

Initially Clement Davies was a warm supporter of David Lloyd George and his ambitious, radical policies for tackling unemployment and the array of social and economic ills facing a troubled nation in the late 1920s – bold Keynesian initiatives which were crystallised in the famous ‘Yellow Book’ *Britain’s Industrial Future* published in 1928. Soon afterwards, however, the Liberal leader’s dramatic *volte face* over the second Labour Government’s Coal Mines Bill in 1930 heralded the parting of the ways.<sup>3</sup> Only fifteen short months after he had somewhat reluctantly

abandoned a promising, well remunerated career as a top ranking barrister in order to become a backbench politician, Davies was already beginning to rue his decision: ‘Losing briefs and wasting my time here [in the House of Commons] – it is really appalling. Sometimes I wish I had stuck to my proper job, but ambition is a terrible thing’.<sup>4</sup> Small wonder, therefore, that in his ever increasing disillusionment with political life and with pressing financial problems, Davies decided to accept a prestigious, well remunerated position as legal director of Lever Brothers, at the enormous annual salary of £10,000.<sup>5</sup> It was widely assumed at the time that this new departure would lead to his retirement from active politics, but a last minute change of heart by his new employers allowed Davies to stand for re-election to parliament in October 1931, when he was returned unopposed as a National Liberal follower of Sir John Simon, as again happened in November 1935.

Throughout the 1930s, however, Clement Davies, a National Liberal, rarely participated in Commons’ debates, displayed but scant enthusiasm for the cut-and-thrust of political life, and devoted much of his time and energy to his duties for Lever Brothers. He has rightly been described as, in that period, ‘almost the archetypal semi-detached politician’,<sup>6</sup> one who did not occupy the centre-ground of political life until 1938–39 when he became chairman of the ‘Vigilantes Group’, a cross-party group of MPs who urged the abandonment of Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement policies in the face of the ever more menacing threat of the dictators Hitler and Mussolini. The Vigilante Group’s influence increased rapidly after the outbreak of war in September 1939,

with Davies himself emerging as one of the most vocal and effective critics of the ailing National Government. Clement Davies eventually resigned from the Government in December, and played an important role in the removal from office of prime minister Neville Chamberlain in May 1940 and his replacement by Churchill.<sup>7</sup> It would seem that Davies shared some rapport with Churchill who may have offered him minor governmental office and a viscounty during 1940. In March 1941 he resigned as a director of Unilever, re-entered political life energetically, now veering sharply leftwards in the political spectrum as he joined the 'Radical Action' group within his party and zealously endorsed the left-wing proposals of the famous Beveridge Report published in 1943.

The policies which Clement Davies now advocated in his political speeches were increasingly socialistic, including even partial nationalisation of the land. The Beveridge initiative was, he insisted, a development of traditional Lloyd George policies to reduce unemployment and improve living standards.<sup>8</sup> At a pre-election meeting convened within his Montgomeryshire constituency in June 1945, his position was unequivocal:

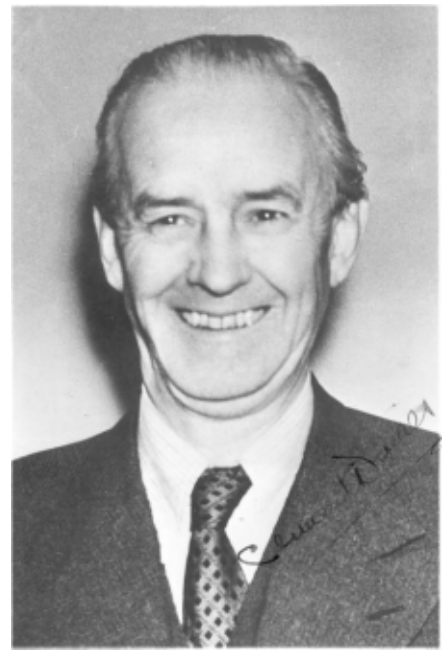
I stand on the side of the progressive. If two parties such as Labour and Conservative were equally balanced then I would vote Labour. Members of the Labour Party and myself can walk side by side for a long way. There are many things on which we agree.<sup>9</sup>

He consequently faced only a Conservative opponent in Montgomeryshire in July 1945, and was even endorsed by the local Transport and General Workers' Union, as 'the only progressive candidate' standing in the division.<sup>10</sup> In the event, Davies was re-elected with a majority of more than 3,000 votes as Attlee's Labour Party swept to power with a huge landslide majority at the polls. He remained true to the line which he had taken during the election campaign:

I pledge myself – as long as the Labour Government works for a permanent peace throughout the world, and works for the ordinary common man, I pledge myself to work alongside that Government.<sup>11</sup>

Only days later, Clement Davies had, perhaps unexpectedly, been chosen 'chairman' (if not leader) of the twelve Liberal MPs who had survived their party's near decimation at the polls in 1945.<sup>12</sup> They had selected their new 'chairman' by the bizarre expedient of requesting each Liberal MP to leave the room in turn while the rest discussed his leadership potential.<sup>13</sup> Davies faced an agonisingly difficult political and personal challenge. Already 61 years of age (and thus the oldest Liberal leader since Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman in 1899), he was totally unprepared and untrained for the experience of leadership, now thrust upon him by the shock defeat of his predecessor as leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, at Caithness and Sutherland. His eleven followers were indeed 'a motley group', most of them re-elected by only a hair's breadth in remote rural constituencies in the Celtic fringe (Wales, Scotland and the west country) and totally lacking cohesion and a common political philosophy. Three of them – Professor W. J. Gruffydd (the University of Wales), Major Gwilym Lloyd-George (Pembrokeshire) and T. L. Horabin (North Cornwall) – were already displaying signs of potential disloyalty, although the last named still became the party's chief whip in the difficult political circumstances of 1945. Clement Davies' loyalty to the Simonite Liberal camp throughout the 1930s, and some of the idiosyncratic sentiments which he had expressed during the war years, led to tension and unease, even dissension, among his colleagues. It had been thought likely that he would resign his seat in order to pursue his professional and business interests full-time, and it was widely known that psychological problems had already compelled him to spend short periods in a nursing home.

In his first speech to the House of Commons as Liberal Party 'Chairman', Davies remained positive: 'We can all rejoice at the end of the Tory regime, at the end of reaction and chaos... We wish this Government well'.<sup>14</sup> While he himself seemed to stand firmly on the left, prepared to support the new Labour Government, Churchill and his fellow Tory leaders, shocked at the scale of their defeat at the polls, looked to the



Edward Clement Davies: signed photo

Liberals as the route to their political recovery and salvation. Some floated the notion of an anti-Socialist centre party (potently reminiscent of the 1918–22 Coalition Government) as the means of excluding Labour from office. Churchill was himself an avid proponent of Liberal-Conservative collaboration, and had displayed heartfelt regret at the departure of his Liberal colleagues from the Coalition Government in the spring of 1945 (Gwilym Lloyd-George alone had remained). During the election campaign he had broadcast to the nation:

Between us and the orthodox Socialists there is a great doctrinal gulf which yawns and gapes ... There is no such gulf between the Conservative and National Government I have formed and the Liberals. There is scarcely a Liberal sentiment which animated the great Liberal leaders of the past which we do not inherit and defend.<sup>15</sup>

Some younger, progressive, more radical Conservative MPs such as Harold Macmillan and Quintin Hogg, members of a group of 'Tory Reformers', went further, the latter asserting that there was 'no striking difference' on domestic policies between themselves and the Liberals. He issued an invitation to the Liberal MPs: 'If Liberals would only come over into Macedonia and help us (or come over somewhere and help somebody) the policy we both believe in might get somewhere. There is no doubt that we would, together, capture



the Conservative Party'.<sup>16</sup> No Liberal MP responded to Hogg's initiative, and Clement Davies was adamant that no formal pact or informal collaboration with either of the other parties could be countenanced.

Davies's strength of character and inner resources were stretched to the limit as the Attlee Governments ran their course. Many of his parliamentary colleagues were potentially disloyal, displaying highly inconsistent, even bizarre, voting records in the lobbies of the House of Commons. There was general Liberal support for the enactments of the Attlee Government from 1945 to 1947, as the early nationalisation programmes, the establishment of the National Health Service and the granting of Indian and Burman independence were warmly applauded. Davies portrayed the setting up of the NHS and the introduction of social insurance as the implementation of fundamental Liberal policies, asserting, 'It would be ignoble to hinder that work merely because it happens to be in the hands of other people to promote'.<sup>17</sup> He insisted that many of the enactments of the Attlee Government were simply 'cashing in on the hard work of the Liberal Party over forty years'.<sup>18</sup> In response to rumbles from his constituency that he might reach some kind of understanding with local Conservatives, he was unrelenting: 'So long as I am their representative in Parliament and the leader of the Liberal Party, there will be no union with the Conservatives in Montgomeryshire. I intend to

re-organise the Liberals in Montgomeryshire soon'.<sup>19</sup>

By 1947 it did indeed appear as if Davies's unequivocal stand and tireless assiduity were yielding positive dividends. The Liberal Party seemed to be emerging from the political doldrums and re-asserting itself as a major party of state. Davies voiced his determination to the Council of the Party Organisation that the Liberals should put up at least 500 candidates at the next general election: 'If we are an independent Party, we will have no truck with anybody, we will stand on our own two feet. We will fight in 600 constituencies. Turn these words into action, or acknowledge defeat here and now'.<sup>20</sup>

By this time his attitude to the Attlee Government (whose honeymoon period had manifestly come to an end) had hardened considerably. The exceptionally hard winter of 1946–47 had led to a severe economic crisis which, Davies was convinced, had been exacerbated by governmental failure to devise an effective overall strategy to balance the national economy. He spelled out his conviction to a Liberal Party rally at the Royal Albert Hall in November: 'Worst of all politically, we are today in the hands of political bankrupts dodging from one subterfuge to another... There is a complete lack of true statesmanship'.<sup>21</sup> Davies's spirited stand against the Conservatives was buttressed by the unwavering support of the party's elder statesman Lord Samuel, a former party leader, who shared a harmonious relationship with his successor, and who proclaimed that the Conservative party had been strengthened in each successive generation by absorbing into its ranks Liberal defectors: 'For my part I will have no share in leading a third swift glide down the slippery slope to extinction'.<sup>22</sup>

At the end of November the Liberal Party issued a statement declaring that it was the duty of all true Liberals to 'stand firm against the Conservative overtures'.<sup>23</sup> Not all prominent Liberals concurred. Lady Violet Bonham Carter, Asquith's daughter, firmly lodged on the party's right wing and a close personal friend of Winston Churchill's, wrote to Lady Megan Lloyd George to express her alarm, 'One must face the possibility

of Parliamentary extinction – *Or do you think this an exaggerated fear?* ... What can a party of 10 do? Containing at most 4 "effectives"?? (& even these not always agreed on major issues?)'. She tended to advocate an electoral pact with the Tories as the route to achieving the desperately needed electoral reform which alone would guarantee Liberal survival.<sup>24</sup> Undeterred, Lady Megan publicly depicted the manifold difficulties facing the Labour Government as a welcome opportunity for a Liberal breakthrough: 'Must this country ... be condemned to the choice of two evils?'.<sup>25</sup>

As the general election approached, Clement Davies studiously distanced himself from both the major political parties. His tentative support for the Attlee Government was long gone. Before the end of 1947 he had criticised the Labour Party to his constituents:

Everything is being organised from the centre and the centre is a small oligarchy. Freedom is threatened by conscription for the Army in peacetime and now by the direction of labour in industry. Hitler and Mussolini began their appeal to the people as Socialists. Is this free country passing into national socialism on the road to a police state, and are the spiritual rights of man to be sacrificed on the altar of materialism erected to false and foreign gods?<sup>26</sup>

During the long run-up to the 1950 general election he spared no effort to pinpoint the position of the Liberals:

Do not run away with the idea that Liberalism provides the middle way between the other two. Still less that it is a compromise between them. Liberalism is a distinct creed – a distinct philosophy: distinct from Socialism, from Communism, and from Conservatism.<sup>27</sup>

Although he battled valiantly to portray the Liberal creed as a positive philosophy, quite distinct from both Socialism and Conservatism, the omni-present danger was that he might alienate both the right and left wings of his tiny party. 'No one knows better than you what a hard struggle it is,' Davies had written despairingly to his predecessor Sir Archibald Sinclair in February 1949. He was heartened somewhat by the response at party rallies and the substantial financial contributions which came to hand, but still felt, 'I have no end of trouble here as you can well understand'.<sup>28</sup> The party was still wracked by deep rooted differ-

ences of opinion over possible co-operation with the Conservatives, and over the advice on voting which should be given to Liberal sympathisers in constituencies where there was no Liberal candidate.<sup>29</sup> As the election finally loomed in the early days of 1950, Davies was privately most pessimistic about his own prospects and those of his fellow Liberal MPs from Wales.<sup>30</sup>

Early in January Attlee announced that Parliament would be dissolved on 3 February, and that polling day would follow on the 23rd. On the day following the Prime Minister's statement, Liberal headquarters issued an unequivocal statement to quell the rumours which persisted in political circles: 'In spite of statements to the contrary, it is still being suggested that the Liberal Party in some parts of the country is allying itself with the Conservative party. This is not so. The Liberal Party emphasises that it is fighting the coming election as an entirely independent force with at least 400 candidates in the field.'<sup>31</sup>

A long and protracted wrangle ensued between the Liberals and Conservatives over the use of the title 'United Liberal and Conservative Association' by at least four local Conservative associations. 'Is it so much to ask', wrote Clement Davies to Churchill, 'that the Conservative Party should fight under its own name, or at least under a name which does not clash with that of another Party which is recognised throughout the world?' Since the Conservative leader had personally approved the use of the term 'Liberal-Conservative', Davies expressed his intention of publishing forthwith his letter of protest in the national press.<sup>32</sup> Churchill at one drafted a debating reply which was masterly in its combination of cool insolence and persiflage:

I thank you for your kindness in writing to me amid your many cares. As you were yourself for eleven years a National Liberal and in that capacity supported the Governments of Mr Baldwin and Mr Neville Chamberlain, I should not presume to correct your knowledge of the moral, intellectual and legal aspects of adding a prefix or a suffix to the honoured name of Liberal. It has certainly often been done before by honourable and distinguished men.<sup>33</sup>

In his further reply Davies dismissed Churchill's lengthy epistle as 'facetious and evasive', deploring the fact that the Tory leader was prepared to support 'what we Liberals rightly regard as an unworthy subterfuge'.<sup>34</sup> Churchill in turn wrote on Davies's letter, 'No further answer'.<sup>35</sup>

When he was adopted at Woodford on 28 January, however, Churchill returned to the subject of:

... the very small and select group of Liberal leaders who conceived themselves the sole heirs of the principles and traditions of Liberalism, and believed themselves to have the exclusive copyright of the word 'Liberal'. This super select attitude finds an example in the exclusion of Lady Violet Bonham Carter and, I may say, of Sir Archibald Sinclair from the four broadcasts the Liberals are making between now and the Poll. In Lady Violet Bonham Carter we have not only a Liberal of unimpeachable loyalty to the party, but one of the finest speakers in the country. Her speech against Socialism, which was so widely read two months ago, recalled the style of old and famous days. But her voice must not be heard on the air on this occasion.<sup>36</sup>

Four days later he returned to the same theme in response to Liberal charges that the Conservatives had attempted to reduce their share of election broadcasts:

When I saw how the Liberal group had distributed their broadcasts, I offered, with the full consent of my colleagues, one of the Conservative twenty-minute broadcasts to Lady Violet Bonham Carter. This offer was made, of course, without any conditions whatever. Lady Violet was perfectly free to say whatever she pleased. She was dissuaded from accepting this not ungenerous offer by the Clement Davies group. The public will not, therefore, hear on the broadcast any clear exposition of the view held by the majority of Liberals, who, while remaining loyal to the Liberal Party, are strongly opposed to Socialism.<sup>37</sup>

In spite of these spirited exchanges at leadership level between Davies and Churchill, it is evident that at provincial centres such as Sheffield and Bristol informal arrangements were made between the local Liberal and Conservative parties in relation to both municipal and parliamentary elections. Most spectacularly of all, a quasi-formal pact was struck at Huddersfield where Liberal Donald Wade was able to capture the West divi-

sion in the absence of a Conservative contender, while the Liberals ran no candidate at Huddersfield West. At Dundee, too, a near-formal merger of the local Liberal and Conservative Parties was foiled only when Liberal Party Headquarters at London put up their own candidate independently of the Dundee Liberal Association.

Generally the outcome of the 1950 election was again disappointing for the Liberals. Although Clement Davies was re-elected comfortably in Montgomeryshire with a majority of 6,780 votes, and four other Liberal MPs from Wales held on – Roderic Bowen (Cardiganshire), Lady Megan Lloyd George (Anglesey), Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris (Carmarthenshire) and Emrys O. Roberts (Merionethshire) – the party polled only 2.6 million votes nationally, lost 319 deposits out of 475, and returned only nine MPs. Davies wrote despairingly to Sinclair, 'The position is far and away more difficult than it has been since the '29 Parliament'.<sup>38</sup> Within weeks his health, never robust, had broken down yet again, and he was compelled to retire from public life for several weeks.<sup>39</sup> Persistent rumours ensued that he was likely to accept a position outside politics or else to retire to the House of Lords, conjecture which was emphatically repudiated.

Davies soldiered on to face an array of political difficulties. The re-elected Attlee Government declared its unwillingness to consider a measure of electoral reform, and a number of influential Liberal peers voiced their intention of joining the



Conservatives. By the spring, Sir Archibald Sinclair, Lord Samuel and the elderly Liberal academic Gilbert Murray (a distinguished Oxford classicist) had all reluctantly concluded that the only viable route ahead lay in an agreement with the Conservatives.<sup>40</sup>

Sinclair argued that only an 'arrangement with the Conservative party – an arrangement on the Huddersfield lines limited to the general election' offered hope of securing electoral reform and thus political

survival.<sup>41</sup> Davies, however, demurred, still sanguine that a distinctive, positive Liberal creed might yet be salvaged.<sup>42</sup> The party generally had grown increasingly despondent ever since the outcome of the February poll. In May Clement Davies spelled out the nub of his dilemma to Gilbert Murray:

If you attended our Liberal Party Committees, or the meetings of the Parliamentary Party, or saw the correspondence that I receive, I believe that you would come to the conclusion that there is no Party today, but a number of individuals who, because of their adherence to the Party, come together only to express completely divergent views.

At times he tended to despair of keeping intact an increasingly fractious party which seemed intent on tearing itself apart:

My own position is one of almost supine weakness for if I give full expression to a definite course of action that at once leads to trouble and a definite split. It is that split that I am so anxious to avoid. We have suffered so much in the past from these quarrels... Any further division now would, I fear, just give the final death blow.<sup>43</sup>

There was ample justification for his heartfelt fears. The left-wing, radical group of MPs within the Parliamentary Liberal Party, which had already lost from its ranks stalwarts like Frank Byers (agonisingly defeated by just ninety-seven votes at North Dorset in February 1950), Wilfrid Roberts and Tom Horabin, had good reason to fear the final victory of the Tories. In the spring two Welsh Liberal MPs – Lady Megan

Lloyd George and Emrys O. Roberts – supported by Dingle Foot and Philip Hopkins, who represented divisions in the west country, began a rearguard action against what they regarded as Clement Davies's inclination 'to veer towards the Tories'.

The concern of the left wing was understandable. There were indications that Davies may have at least engaged in discussions with Conservative representatives. He had certainly met and corresponded

with Lord Beaverbrook in the early months of 1949,<sup>44</sup> following which the newspaper magnate had expressed the hope that they might again 'have some conversation on politics'.<sup>45</sup>

The narrowness of the Conservative defeat in February 1950 – Attlee now had an overall majority of only six seats – increased the pressure on them to seek some kind of alliance with the Liberals. In his response to the King's speech, Churchill quoted *The Times* editorial which had attacked the Liberals for 'a national disservice by the irresponsible spattering of the electoral map with hundreds of candidatures'.<sup>46</sup> Now, in the wake of his narrow defeat and of Lady Violet Bonham Carter's refusal of his offer of one of the Conservative election radio broadcast slots, Churchill dangled a more positive olive branch in the form of a promise of an inquiry into the need for electoral reform by a future Conservative government. Both Churchill and Lord Woolton had approached Davies to discuss the possible allocation of constituencies, while prominent Tory backbencher Cyril Osborne had written to *The Times* in early May insisting that 'all liberal minded Liberals can co-operate with the modern Conservative Party, which holds the same faith'.<sup>47</sup>

Davies kept detailed notes of the arguments which he had used in his discussions with Churchill. He asserted that Liberal Party headquarters could not intervene in the choice of candidates (although, as events transpired, it

did so to abort a pact at Dundee). An alliance between the Liberals and Conservatives, he went on, 'would never be permitted by the rank-and-file of the Liberal Party... There is throughout the country a body of Liberal voters, of all ages, who will not vote Conservative'. He was not prepared even to countenance any alliance which called into question the independence of the Liberal Party so that 'there can be, therefore, no overall or central agreement made between Party leaders, or Party Headquarters, for the allocation of constituencies'.<sup>48</sup>

So widespread was the concern and anxiety that permeated the ranks of the Liberal Party by the spring of 1950 that Clement Davies felt obliged to issue a public statement that he had 'no intention of compromising the independence of the Liberal Party'.<sup>49</sup> The same unwavering standpoint was repeated in his speech to the annual meeting of the Liberal Party of Wales at the end of the same month: 'The Liberal Party will not jeopardise its independence or restrict its freedom of action for any price, however great'.<sup>50</sup> To the Liberal faithful he underlined the same point in print: 'The Liberal leaders have no knowledge of Conservative intentions or of Conservative proposals and no negotiations are taking place'.<sup>51</sup> Yet his brave rhetoric was somewhat undermined as a steady stream of major party figure joined the ranks of both the Conservatives and Labour.<sup>52</sup> In particular, the Liberal Party was rocked by repeated conjecture that Lady Megan Lloyd George (whom Davies had appointed deputy party leader in January 1949 in a desperate, last ditch attempt to keep her within the Liberal fold) was about to defect to Labour.<sup>53</sup> At the party's annual assembly convened at Scarborough in September Davies stuck to his guns:

We refuse to get out. We refuse to die. We are determined to live and fight on. There is an undoubted danger in the division of the country between two parties using two mighty, powerful, wealthy machines. Danger lies in the possibility that the two machines will become all powerful, controlling the local associations, controlling candidates, and members of the House.<sup>54</sup>

But there was uproar as soon as the party's right wing sensed a more radical

spirit at the assembly. Acting as its spokesman, Lady Violet Bonham Carter wrote to tell Clement Davies that she felt 'aghast when I read the proceedings of the [1950] Assembly... The lunatic fringe seems to have complete command'.<sup>55</sup> Only weeks later it was the turn of the left wing, led by Lady Megan, to rebel spectacularly, threatening to join Labour at once, and pushing Davies to the brink of resignation as party leader. 'The truth of the matter as it seems to me is this,' he wrote. 'They are not concerned really about the Party or the country. They are concerned about themselves only and think that their best chance lies in help from the Socialists.'<sup>56</sup> 'Don't speak or even think of laying down the leadership. This is the moment to stand fast and fight,' responded Lady Violet, who was clearly horrified at the prospect of Megan succeeding Clement Davies as party leader. 'Neither Megan nor Emrys Roberts have the slightest desire to leave the Party. They know *how* small a part they would play in the Labour Party.'<sup>57</sup> In the event, Clement Davies refused to yield, and the rebel MPs eventually backed down, but their very real threat was the most harrowing manifestation yet of the fundamental dilemma facing the Liberals.<sup>58</sup>

Not only did rumours of clandestine negotiations between Clement Davies and Conservative leaders cause deep dissension in Liberal Party ranks, they also undermined the internal morale of the Tories.<sup>59</sup> By the autumn of 1950 the influential 1922 Committee had grown highly uneasy, and some Tory backbenchers were beginning to criticise Churchill for his apparent wooing of the Liberals.<sup>60</sup> Lady Violet Bonham Carter had, it was rumoured, been entrusted to negotiate with leading Conservatives concerning an allocation of constituencies.

As 1951 began it was very much apparent that the 'frustrating and frustrated Parliament'<sup>61</sup> elected the previous February could not continue in office for very much longer. In Montgomeryshire the local Conservative Association resolved to withdraw their candidate in order to allow Clement Davies a straight fight against a sole Labour opponent. Davies was unimpressed:

The Liberal Party will remain independent. I cannot make a bargain with anybody. I have nothing to bargain with except my principles. I am sufficient of a democrat to say that any man should have the right to vote for the candidate who is most likely to represent his voice in Parliament, and the more candidates that come forward the better.<sup>62</sup>

Although there was no question of a national alliance between the Liberals and Conservatives, local 'arrangements' were very firmly on the political agenda. At the Labour-held seat of Colne Valley in Yorkshire the local Conservative Association again withdrew its candidate in favour of Lady Violet Bonham Carter, partly because of her close friendship with Winston Churchill. At the beginning of the year she had been warned by Clement Davies, 'The one matter that worried me was the question whether you, or I, or any of us, should give beforehand a pledge as to our support of either of the other two Parties in the House of Commons after the Election. I myself refuse to give such a pledge'.<sup>63</sup> She herself attempted to justify the situation by would make every effort to broaden the basis of his Government and include some men of real ability drawn from outside the Party fold'.<sup>64</sup>

As the October election approached, the 'Huddersfield pact' made in 1950 remained operational, while a similar agreement enabled Arthur Holt to capture Bolton West for the Liberals against a sole Labour opponent, in the event the only Liberal gain of the election. No Liberal candidate stood in Bolton East. Clement Davies, Roderic Bowen and Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris all enjoyed straight fights against Labour men. Some senior Liberal Party officials spared no effort to persuade Davies that in such agreements lay the route to future party survival.

In the run-up to polling day the National Liberal Lord Teviot suggested to Clement Davies that the emphasis of the Conservative and Liberal election broadcasts demonstrated how close the two parties had now become, so that Liberal sympathisers in constituencies with no candidate of their own should be urged to vote Conservative.<sup>65</sup> Davies at once dismissed the suggestion, on the advice of both Philip Fothergill<sup>66</sup> and Lord Samuel, who proposed that the

Liberal leader should reply stating 'that the Liberals do not wish to be reduced to the same political futility as the Liberal Nationals (but not necessarily in those words!)'.<sup>67</sup> Smarting at the tart rebuff, Teviot published his letter in the national press with the intention of embarrassing Davies.<sup>68</sup>

It would appear that the notably restrained and moderate campaign which the Conservatives waged in October 1951 was a studiously conscious bid for Liberal votes. Churchill even offered support for Lady Violet at Colne Valley, and he himself travelled northwards to address one of her election meetings. Rumours intensified that a Tory victory at the polls would lead to the offer of a Cabinet position to Clement Davies. When the Liberal leader had broadcast to the nation on 28 September, the nub of his message was an assault on the record and policies of the Socialists.<sup>69</sup> As the young political analyst David Butler, then beginning to make a name for himself, wrote in response, 'Mr Davies' broadcast, it was widely noted, attacked only the Labour Party and, on points of policy, said little that would have caused surprise if it had come from a Conservative... In an election in which a large number of Liberals had no candidate of their own, this emphasis was regarded by many as particularly significant'.<sup>70</sup>

When he was adopted as the Liberal candidate for Montgomeryshire at Newtown on 6 October, Clement Davies again made his point: 'There are candidates of various descriptions, but there is only one Liberal Party. Don't you have a second thought that we are anything but an absolutely independent party, with no allegiance or obligation to any of the other two great parties'.<sup>71</sup> Simultaneously Liberal Party headquarters issued the following statement:

The attention of the Liberal Party headquarters has been drawn to a suggestion appearing in a morning paper that Liberal leaders might be offered positions in a Conservative Government if the Conservatives were successful at the polls. The Liberal Party repeats what has been many times affirmed, that it is fighting the election as a completely independent party without any understanding, pact or arrangement with any other party. It has no knowledge of the intentions either of the Prime Minister or of



Clement Davies with Lord Samuel, Liberal leader 1931–35

the Leader of the Opposition in the event of either of them being called upon to form the next Government. If either a Labour or a Conservative Prime Minister wished to broaden the base of his administrations the Parliamentary Liberal Party would at that time decide its course of action in the normal constitutional way.<sup>72</sup>

Although Davies was himself re-elected with a record majority of 9,221 votes, a total of only six Liberal MPs were returned, while four radicals (including Lady Megan Lloyd George and Emrys O. Roberts) lost their seats. Arthur Holt at Bolton West was the only new Liberal MP. Even party sympathisers feared that this was indeed the point of no return for their party. The staunchly loyal *Manchester Guardian* almost gave up hope:

It is hard to see in this depressing picture much ground for building up a country-wide political party on the old model. Unless there is some change in the Conservative Party or some break-up in the Labour Party, the Liberal Party can look forward only to further attrition and further losses to the two major parties.<sup>73</sup>

Although Labour had again polled slightly more votes than the Conservatives, an unusually high percentage of floating voters in some marginal constituencies chose to vote Tory, which changed established voting patterns enough to give the Tories 321 seats to Labour's 295. It was, in a sense, a freak win. Winston Churchill became Prime Minister with an absolute majority. Speculation again intensified that

Clement Davies would be offered ministerial office, perhaps the new position of minister for Welsh affairs.<sup>74</sup> In the event it is almost certain that on 28 October Churchill offered the Liberal leader the ministry of education (possibly within the Conservative Cabinet) in a move which one historian has described as 'the deadliest shaft of all'.<sup>75</sup> There is no doubt that Davies's immediate personal reaction was to accept. He had administrative flair, and was still not lacking in political ambition. Moreover, he was now sixty-seven years of age, and must have realised that this offer was indeed his very last opportunity to participate in government.

At Churchill's London home and for a full two hours over lunch at Chartwell the following day the two men were closeted together as the Prime Minister used his persuasive skills on Davies. Churchill was 'politely gloomy' as the conversation turned to the past:

Clement Davies: Do you remember speaking at Bradford in 1909?

Churchill: No.

Mrs Churchill: Yes dear, you must.

Churchill: Ah, yes. That was when I was a young Liberal. I must have made a very *truculent* speech.<sup>76</sup>

Davies realised, however, that it was a team decision, and stated that he must discuss the offer with his senior party colleagues, among them Jo Grimond, Frank Byers, Lady Violet Bonham Carter, Lady Megan Lloyd George and

Lord Samuel. Of these Lady Violet alone urged him to accept. Five years later, following Davies's retirement as Liberal leader, she recalled her advice in the face of Churchill's offer:

You may remember that when Winston wanted you & two Liberal Under-Secretaries to join him in 1951 I wanted you to go in. My reasons were that the economic crisis was *far* greater than in 1931 – when Samuel, Archie [Sinclair] & Donald Maclean joined the national coalition (without any consultation or 'by-your-leave' from the party!) & I thought that the Liberals shld. – through you – make their contribution, & in spite of their small numbers could wield real *power*. . . I did not feel that a Coalition is holy if it is made up of 3 parties, & unholy if it only consists of two! Moreover I thought that responsibility & administrative experience wld. benefit our party which had had none since 1918. One must construct as well as criticise. Whatever you may have thought or felt you refused office then – a great personal sacrifice – because you felt that in so doing you were interpreting the people's will. Looking back I feel that you may well have been right. Your action – however disinterested & patriotic – might well have split the remnant we had left. (I must add that *only* Winston's leadership made me think it possible. I cld never have contemplated it under Eden! Winston was never a Tory – as the Tories know.) But whether right or wrong it was a great & selfless sacrifice – which few would have made – & one that will always be remembered – with reverence & admiration.<sup>77</sup>

All the others were adamant that acceptance would spell the death knell of the Liberals as an independent political party. They knew full well that the tiny group of six Liberal MPs could easily become submerged into the Conservative Party as had the former Simonite Liberals. If he wished to preserve his party intact, Davies really had no choice. On the evening of 28 October, Liberal Party headquarters issued a statement:

Mr Clement Davies has received an offer of office in Mr Churchill's Government. He has felt unable to accept it. At the same time, the Liberal Party is deeply concerned at the possible effect of the narrow majority in the House of Commons resulting from the General Election upon the successful conduct of British policy both in domestic and international affairs. In these circumstances it will, both in Parliament and in the

country, give to the Government support for measures clearly conceived in the interests of the country as a whole.<sup>78</sup>

Davies's decision was depicted as a sharp 'rebuff' to Churchill's declared objective of forming a 'broad-based Government which will be as widely representative as possible'.<sup>79</sup> But it was reported that the Prime Minister had voiced his intention of assisting the ailing Liberal Party by considering the introduction of proportional representation in Parliament and the possible restoration of the university seats which had been abolished by Attlee's Government in 1948.<sup>80</sup> Harold Macmillan preserved in his diary a graphic account of the process of Cabinet making at the end of October 1951:

Meanwhile Clem Davies has come and gone. Will he be Minister of Education? He would love this, but what about the Liberal party? He will try to persuade them, but Megan L. George, and Lord Samuel will resist. He leaves for the meeting. (We hear later – on the wireless – that the Liberals will not play).<sup>81</sup>

It was widely felt in political circles that Davies might have enjoyed a notable success as minister of education. He had already given much attention to the problems of educational provision in rural areas. Had he accepted, junior ministerial office would also have been conferred on two of his Liberal colleagues.<sup>82</sup> He was widely considered to be 'the ablest MP who had never held ministerial office', and one who, by 1951, had inevitably 'had a bellyful of dissension within his own party', but he had put loyalty to the Liberal Party first.<sup>83</sup> His refusal was, as Lady Violet later put it, 'a renunciation rare in politics today'.<sup>84</sup> 'We refuse to be stamped out' was Clement Davies's proud call to his 1951 party assembly, 'In spite of all temptations, we still prefer our own doctrine and we are determined to maintain our independence'.<sup>85</sup>

There is no doubt that Churchill's offer and Davies's response had marked a major turning point in the history of the Liberal Party. As Labour MP Philip Noel-Baker wrote from the re-assembled House of Commons to his mistress the defeated Lady Megan Lloyd George, 'I'm so immensely happy that you are *not* here, & faced with the hopeless conflict you would have had in your party'.<sup>86</sup>

Gilbert Murray reflected to Lord Samuel, who, together with Sir Archibald Sinclair, had attended the Liberal Party meeting convened to discuss Churchill's offer to Davies:

Well, we have had another resounding defeat, and yet I am sure that there is a strong Liberal feeling in the country. For example, the O[xford] U[niversity] Liberal Club has now, I believe, a record number of over 1,100, and is much larger than either of its rivals – someone told me about twice as big. *I was glad that Winston offered a post to Clement Davies, but I think that CD's answer was exactly right.*<sup>87</sup>

On reflection, Davies claimed to be satisfied with his decision – 'I am glad you agree that we did absolutely right in refusing Winston's offer' – and with the encouraging measure of support for the Liberal Party from university undergraduates.<sup>88</sup> But as maverick Socialist Desmond Donnelly, narrowly re-elected in Pembrokeshire, wrote to Caradog Jones, Davies's Labour opponent in Montgomeryshire in October 1951, 'Old Clem was swilling gin in the smokeroom in mid-afternoon to forget the job old Samuel made him refuse. However if he throws in his hand with the Tories any more he will be finished'.<sup>89</sup>

Dr Chris Cook has generously described Churchill's offer as 'presumably one of genuine goodwill to the Liberals',<sup>90</sup> and it may well be that an element of sentimentality surrounded the olive branch. On the other hand the Tory leader was well aware that his party had won through in 1951 on a freak minority vote, and he was thus desperately anxious to neutralise the Liberal threat for the future.

There are indications that he regarded the ministry of education as of minimal interest and significance. It was widely known that, when he had offered the same position to R. A. Butler back in 1940, he had apologised for having nothing better available. The position was filled almost as an afterthought in early November 1951 – nearly the last ministerial position to be filled – and was offered to Miss Florence Horsbrugh, the little known MP for Manchester Moss Side, who had only just returned to the Commons following defeats in the general elec-



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tions of 1945 and 1950.<sup>91</sup> She apparently was approached only because Walter Elliot was not at home when the prime minister had telephoned him to offer him the vacant position. Elliot, it is said, was devastated at the rebuff, and was consequently made a Companion of Honour as a consolation prize in 1952.<sup>92</sup> At the end of the day, the ministry of education was not even accorded Cabinet status in the new Conservative administration.

Following his discussions with Churchill back in 1950, Clem Davies had noted, 'The only way in which the Liberals could maintain their independence and be distinct from Liberal Unionists and National Liberals, would be for them to enter into a binding self-denying [*sic*] that they would not take any office in a Conservative government'.<sup>93</sup> At the end of the following year he had remained true to his own prescient edict. Goaded in the Commons by Anthony Wedgwood-Benn (Labour, Bristol South-East) on 8 November to explain his apparent refusal to '[give] some stability to the present Government', Davies replied, 'For the simple reason that he and his party remained absolutely independent.' '(Loud Opposition laughter).<sup>94</sup> At a luncheon held in Davies's honour at the National Liberal Club two weeks later, Lord Samuel was effusive in his praise for the decision which he had taken. Davies responded, 'However small be our numbers, we have a task to perform, and that cannot be performed if



we sink our independence and see the party gradually welded into the structure of another party'.<sup>95</sup>

*J. Graham Jones is Assistant Archivist at the National Library of Wales, currently responsible for the Welsh Political Archive. He is the author of A Pocket Guide: the History of Wales (1990) and several articles on late nineteenth and twentieth century Welsh politics.*

#### Notes

- 1 The phrase is the title of Lord (Emlyn) Hooson's lecture to the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion on 19 June 1996, published in *The Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, 1997 (New Series, Vol. 4, 1998), 168–86, and reprinted in the *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 24 (Autumn 1999), 3–13.
- 2 Roy Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party, 1895–1970* (London, 1971), caption to plate opposite p. 248.
- 3 See the *Montgomeryshire Express*, 2 September 1930.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*, 10 August 1930; Hooson, 'Clement Davies', pp. 172–73.
- 6 Hooson, 'Clement Davies', p. 173.
- 7 David M. Roberts, 'Clement Davies and the fall of Neville Chamberlain', *Welsh History Review* 8 (1976–77), 188–215.
- 8 *Montgomeryshire Express*, 12 May 1945.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 9 June 1945.
- 10 NLW, Clement Davies Papers C3/12, circular letter from Huw T. Edwards, area secretary of the TGWU, 2 July 1945. I am most grateful to Mr Stanley Clement-Davies, London, for permission to consult and make use of his father's papers.
- 11 *Montgomeryshire Express*, 28 July 1945.
- 12 *The Times*, 3 August 1945, p. 4.
- 13 Douglas, *op. cit.*, pp. 249–50.
- 14 *House of Commons Debates, 5th series*, Vol. 413, cc. 117–18 (16 August 1945).
- 15 Cited in C. Cooke, *Sir Winston Churchill: a self portrait* (London, 1954), p. 199.
- 16 *The Spectator*, 21 September 1945, p. 267.
- 17 *Liberal Magazine*, July 1946, p. 309.
- 18 *Montgomeryshire Express*, 10 August 1946.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Liberal News*, 19 September 1947.
- 21 NLW, Clement Davies Papers K1/41, draft speech notes, 17 November 1947.
- 22 *Liberal News*, 21 November 1947.
- 23 *The Times*, 27 November 1947.
- 24 NLW MS 20475C, no. 3168, Lady Violet Bonham Carter to Lady Megan Lloyd George, 17 November 1947 ('Private').
- 25 NLW MS 20491E, no. 3429, unlabelled press cutting dated 18 November 1947.
- 26 *Montgomeryshire Express*, 11 October 1947.
- 27 NLW, Clement Davies Papers K1/48, draft speech notes, 10 May 1949.
- 28 *Ibid.* J3/3, Davies to Sinclair, 16 February 1949 (copy).
- 29 See *ibid.* J3/9, Sinclair to Davies, 2 January 1950.
- 30 *Ibid.* J3/10, Davies to Sinclair, 6 January 1949 [*recte* 1950] (copy); J3/11i, Sinclair to Davies, 9 January 1950; J3/12, Davies to Sinclair, 12 January 1950 (copy).
- 31 *The Times*, 12 January 1950.
- 32 Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge, Churchill Papers 2/64, Davies to Churchill, 23 January 1950: 'My dear Churchill ...'.
- 33 *Ibid.*, Churchill to Davies, 25 January 1950 (copy): 'My dear Davies ...'.
- 34 *Ibid.*, Davies to Churchill, 26 January 1950: 'My dear Churchill ...'.
- 35 *Ibid.*, note initialled 'WSC', 26 January 1950.
- 36 Quoted in H. G. Nicholas, *The British General Election of 1950* (London, 1951), pp. 86–87.
- 37 *The Times*, 2 February 1950.
- 38 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J3/14, Davies to Sinclair, 22 March 1950 (copy).
- 39 *Ibid.* J3/15, Sinclair to Davies, 28 March 1950; J3/16, Davies to Sinclair, 17 April 1950 (copy).
- 40 *Ibid.* J3/23, Sinclair to Davies, 3 May 1950; J3/25, Murray to Davies, 10 May 1950; House of Lords Record Office, Samuel Papers A/130(9c), notes of conversation by Lady Violet Bonham Carter, 4 May 1950.
- 41 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J3/23, Sinclair to Davies, 3 May 1950.
- 42 *Ibid.* J3/22, Davies to Sinclair, 28 April 1950 (copy).
- 43 *Ibid.* J3/26, Davies to Murray, 11 May 1950 (copy).
- 44 *Ibid.* J1/75–78.
- 45 *Ibid.* J1/78, Beaverbrook to Davies, 19 January 1949.
- 46 *The Times*, 27 February 1950.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 12 May 1950.
- 48 NLW, Clement Davies Papers C1/54, notes by CD entitled 'Liberal position as put to me by Mr. Winston Churchill and Lord Woolton, 1950'.
- 49 *The Times*, 3 May 1950.
- 50 *Liberal News*, 26 May 1950: 'The Liberal Party is not for sale'.
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 See Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945–51* (London, 1984), pp. 292–93.
- 53 See *The Observer*, 4 June 1950.
- 54 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 30 September 1950.
- 55 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J3/42, Lady Violet Bonham Carter to Davies, 6 October 1950.
- 56 *Ibid.* J3/45, Davies to Lady Violet Bonham Carter, 15 November 1950 (copy).
- 57 *Ibid.* J3/46, Lady Violet Bonham Carter to Davies, 18 November 1950.
- 58 See the *Daily Telegraph*, 18 November 1950.
- 59 See Malcolm Baines, 'The survival of the British Liberal Party, 1933–59' in Anthony Gorst, Lewis Johnman and W. Scott Lucas (eds.), *Contemporary British History, 1931–1961: Politics and the Limits of Policy* (London and New York, 1991), p. 26.
- 60 Bodleian Library, Oxford, Conservative Party Archives CC01/8/541, memorandum by J.P.L. Thomas, 'Negotiations with the Liberals', sent to Woolton, Piersenné and Maxse, 15 September 1950.
- 61 The phrase is that used by Harold Macmillan in his *Tides of Fortune* (London, 1969), p. 352.
- 62 *Montgomeryshire Express*, 14 October 1950.
- 63 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J3/53, Davies to Lady Violet Bonham Carter, 11 January 1951 (copy).
- 64 House of Lords Record Office, Samuel Papers A/155 (xiii) 42, Lady Violet Bonham Carter to Samuel, 28 February 1951.
- 65 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J3/58, Teviot to Davies, 4 October 1951.
- 66 *Ibid.* J3/60, 'Suggested reply to Lord Teviot's letter of 4.10.51'.
- 67 *Ibid.* J3/59, M. J. O'Donovan, private secretary to Lord Samuel, to Davies, 5 October 1951.
- 68 *Ibid.* J3/62, telegram from Teviot to Davies, 6 October 1951.
- 69 Published in *extenso* in *The Listener*, 4 October 1951.
- 70 D. E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1951* (London, 1952), p. 65.
- 71 *The Times*, 8 October 1951.
- 72 *Ibid.*
- 73 *Manchester Guardian*, 27 October 1951.
- 74 See the *Western Mail*, 27 October 1951.
- 75 Douglas, *op. cit.*, p. 265.
- 76 Martin Gilbert, *Never Despair: Winston S. Churchill, 1945–1965* (Minerva paperback edition, 1990), p. 655.
- 77 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J3/83, Lady Violet Bonham Carter to Davies, 2 October 1956.
- 78 *The Times*, 29 October 1951.
- 79 *Ibid.*
- 80 *Western Mail*, 29 October 1951; *Manchester Guardian*, 29 October 1951.
- 81 Cited in Macmillan, *Tides of Fortune*, p. 365.
- 82 *Western Mail*, 30 October 1951; *Manchester Guardian*, 30 October 1951.
- 83 Hooson, 'Clement Davies', p. 181.
- 84 *Manchester Guardian*, 1 October 1956.
- 85 Cited in Alan Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma* (London, 1966), p. 65.
- 86 NLW, Lady Megan Lloyd George Papers, PNB to MLG, 12 November 1951.
- 87 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J3/63, Murray to Samuel, 29 October 1951 (copy) (my emphasis).
- 88 *Ibid.* J3/65, Davies to Murray, 9 November 1951 (copy).
- 89 NLW, D. Caradog Jones Papers, file 2, Donnelly to Jones, 5 November 1951.
- 90 Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party, 1900–1984* (London, 1984), p. 134.
- 91 *Western Mail*, 2 November 1951.
- 92 Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 656.
- 93 NLW, Clement Davies Papers C1/54.
- 94 *The Times*, 9 November 1951.
- 95 *Ibid.*, 22 November 1951.

