

SWINGING IN THE '60s

MARY MURPHY AND PONTYPRIDD

At the beginning of the 1960s, the Pontypridd parliamentary constituency in south Wales was dominated by the Labour Party and the coalmining industry, although in some respects it was a disparate cluster of communities from Pontypridd in the north to Llantrisant further south, and including Cowbridge and Bonvilston in the Vale of Glamorgan.

Steve Belzak

examines the story of how a small group of Liberal activists, led by the redoubtable Mary Murphy, set out to challenge Labour's hegemony.



60s TO THE LIBERALS

PONTYPRIDD URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL

IN TERMS of local government, Pontypridd's constituent municipalities made up a patchwork of different areas, including Pontypridd Urban District Council, Llantrisant and Llantwit Fardre Rural District Council, and also parts of Cardiff Rural District Council and Cowbridge Rural District Council.

The constituency came into existence in 1918 and was held until 1922 by a coalition Liberal, Mr T. A. Lewis, who lost it in a by-election to Labour in 1922, who have held it ever since. Between 1922 and 1970 it was contested by the Liberals only at the 1931 and 1938 by-elections (and in the latter case it was by a National Liberal), and in the 1931 and 1945 general elections.¹

The Liberal situation in England and Wales at the dawn of the 1960s

The sensational by-election result at Orpington in 1962 gave an enormous boost to the fortunes of the Liberal Party.² However, the sort of voters that the Liberals in southern England were appealing to at this stage were not the sort to be found in the South Wales industrial mining communities. The latter were, in the main, the kind of working-class voters who lived in terraced houses and tended to vote Labour at parliamentary elections. In any event, Cook argues that the 1963 local election results showed that

Liberal support was dropping.³ It is true that the 1964 general election enabled the party to 'break into new ground' with a share of the poll, at 11.2 per cent, that was double its 1959 level, and nine MPs.⁴ However, the closeness of the result brought with it fresh problems, with a national squeeze from the two main parties, and, with the exception of Roxburgh, Selkirk & Peebles, a crop of disappointing by-election results in the subsequent parliament.

In Wales, the fortunes of Liberalism in the 1950s seemed to be going in the opposite direction to those of Liberalism in England. Just as the latter was showing signs of new life, the former suffered the catastrophic loss of the Carmarthen by-election to Labour. However, as David Roberts points out, the new tide *did*, as the 1960s dawned, lap against Wales, with successes in the local government elections that year in Cardiff, Neath and Llanelli.⁵ Nevertheless, as J. Graham Jones notes, the Liberal position in Wales in the early 1960s remained 'precarious' as the party prepared for the coming Westminster election, and 'ultimately there was no Liberal recovery in Wales in 1964.'⁶

Pontypridd Urban District Council (PUDC)

At the beginning of the 1960s, the council was overwhelmingly dominated by the Labour Party, which held more than

twenty of the twenty-seven seats, with just one Liberal (two from 1962 onwards), and a handful of Independents. The Council was divided into seven multi-member wards with elections every year for a third of its membership for three-year terms.

Liberal membership of the council in the early 1960s was concentrated in one four-member ward, Trallwn, which lies between Pontypridd town centre and the mining village of Cilfynydd. It was, and still is, predominantly comprised of terraced houses built around the end of the nineteenth century, although some houses on Pontypridd Common, on the eastern side of the ward, might be considered home to a wealthier professional group.

Until 1948 the ward was entirely Labour, but one seat was won by a Liberal, Eddie Williams, in a by-election in November 1948, and held by him until 1954. The by-election was caused by the death of a Labour councillor. The ward Labour Party nominated a Mrs Milton, a longstanding member of the party, to be its candidate, but her nomination was rejected by the constituency party because, at sixty-five years of age, she was considered too old.⁷ The campaign of Eddie Williams, a deacon and treasurer of a local chapel, seized on this in a hard-fought campaign in which he was described as 'a firm friend of the old age pensioners, whose fight he

Cllr Mary Murphy
as Mayor of
Pontypridd in
the mid 1960s
(photo by kind
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supports.⁸ Williams won against the Labour candidate by 1,381 votes to 986 in what was described as 'one of the heaviest polls known in a by-election.'⁹ It was a campaign which had seen both the local Labour MP and the Labour MP for Hartlepool (whose home was in the ward) out canvassing, but to no avail. Councillor Williams' agent described the result as conclusive proof 'that the Trallwn ward is Liberal', while the Labour agent branded it as a victory for 'the combined forces of Liberals and Tories in the ward.'¹⁰ Eddie Williams served as a councillor for five and a half years until he unexpectedly lost his seat in 1954 in what was described by the local newspaper as a 'sensational election result.'¹¹

The ward was then bereft of Liberal representation until 1960 when another Liberal, W. L. Simmons, defeated a Labour candidate.¹² Simmons was joined two years later by Reg Price, and when Simmons announced that he was resigning from the council in early 1963, because he had moved to Bideford, Price expressed his deep regrets. Within a fortnight, the local Liberal Association, meeting in Pontypridd YMCA, had decided to adopt two new candidates – 'two prominent local residents', in the words of the local newspaper – for the May elections: Mr Cyril Morgan for Rhydyfelin, and Miss Mary Edwards for the vacant Trallwn seat.¹³

Mr Morgan explained his outlook: 'The tragedy of Pontypridd is that it is in the grip of a monopoly factor in the guise of the Labour Party that seems to have the impression that the council is the exclusive right of the Labour Party.'¹⁴ Derek Lewis amplifies this by explaining that, while there were Liberals, like himself, who became active for ideological reasons, there were many who disliked the 'one-party totalitarian style' of Labour in the Welsh valleys and passionately believed in the merits of opposition and political competition. Not that ideology excluded an oppositional stance; the two often went hand-in-hand.¹⁵ It seems safe to conclude that national phenomena, like Orpington and Jo Grimond, had much less of a role to play than purely local factors.

Mary Edwards, later to become Mary Murphy, was a Pontypridd woman, the daughter of Mr Richard Edwards and Mrs Annie Edwards of Taff Villa, Berw Road. She attended Pontypridd Girls' Grammar School and Bangor Teacher Training College where she studied physical education. A fluent Welsh speaker, she was a member of Sardis Congregational Church, Pontypridd, and returned to her native town, teaching first at Mill Street Secondary School and then at Ysgol Uwchradd, Rhydyfelin. She also travelled widely, lived for a year in the United States and visited, among other places, the Soviet Union (in 1958) although she told the *Pontypridd Observer* that it was Israel that impressed her most.¹⁶

In the May 1963 elections, Cyril Morgan failed by a considerable margin to win a seat in Rhydyfelin, but Mary Edwards won her seat in Trallwn by 1,183 votes to Labour's 846.¹⁷ Labour also gained a seat from the Independents that year, two of whom had represented the Town ward.

Liberal activity in the local press began to pick up, with articles and letters on issues such as how the Liberals would run the town's buses, and the party's policy on housing. In April 1964, it was announced that, for the first time in many years, the Liberals would contest the Town ward, the candidate being a fifty-six year old who had been a Liberal member since the age of eighteen.¹⁸ In the event, Labour won in the Town ward, unseating the remaining Independent, and attributing this to the development of a large council housing estate at Glyncoch which provided solid backing for socialism.¹⁹ It is worth noting that Labour were returned unopposed in the Cilfynydd, Graig, Rhydyfelin and Trallwn wards.

However, it was not just the PUDC wards mentioned above in which candidates were returned without an election. This was true to an even greater extent of the Glamorgan County Council. Elections were held every three years, in April, and the record of competition was abysmal. The Liberals decided not to contest any county seats in 1964, but there was one contest in the Rhondda ward

between the official Labour candidate and an Independent Labour candidate. Although the official Labour nominee was returned comfortably by 1,682 votes to 754, the result was described by the local press as a 'jolt for Labour.'²⁰ At least the Labour candidate in the October 1964 general election was not returned unopposed, but his competition was provided by a Conservative only – there was no Liberal challenger.

The 1965 round of elections was to produce no real advance. After the elections there were twenty-three Labour councillors, two Liberals in the Trallwn ward, and two Independents in the Treforest ward. Pontypridd was, in the words of the local newspaper, 'a Labour citadel.'²¹

On the attack

An interesting change appears to have taken place between the early and mid-1960s in respect of press coverage of PUDC meetings. Reports in the earlier period had all the quality of the old *Soviet Weekly*. No doubt this was due not to the local press currying favour with the Labour administration, but because of the general lack of opposition within the council.

The new style of Liberal opposition was exemplified by the Liberal attack on the all-Labour composition of the Pontypridd Burial Board. They argued that not all members of the Board were entitled to be on it since they were not ratepayers, as laid down by the Pontypridd Burial Board Act of 1892. This attack was given added weight by the Pontypridd Liberals seeking advice from Michael Meadowcroft, local government officer at the party's London HQ. Meadowcroft in consequence wrote to Welsh Secretary, Jim Griffiths, asking him to investigate the matter.²² While this was going on, the Liberals gained a third member, in a by-election caused by the death of a Labour councillor representing Rhydyfelin. Leslie Broom was elected on 11 February 1966 following an energetic campaign in which he said that candidates should contest their seats – 'Allowing candidates to be elected unopposed can lead to apathy and complacency ... Councillors should be seen in

'The tragedy of Pontypridd is that it is in the grip of a monopoly factor in the guise of the Labour Party that seems to have the impression that the council is the exclusive right of the Labour Party.'

and around the ward concerning themselves with people's problems, and there are a great many ward matters that need attention.²³ Mr Broom instanced derelict houses, culverts, allotments and the need for a reduction in rent and rates.

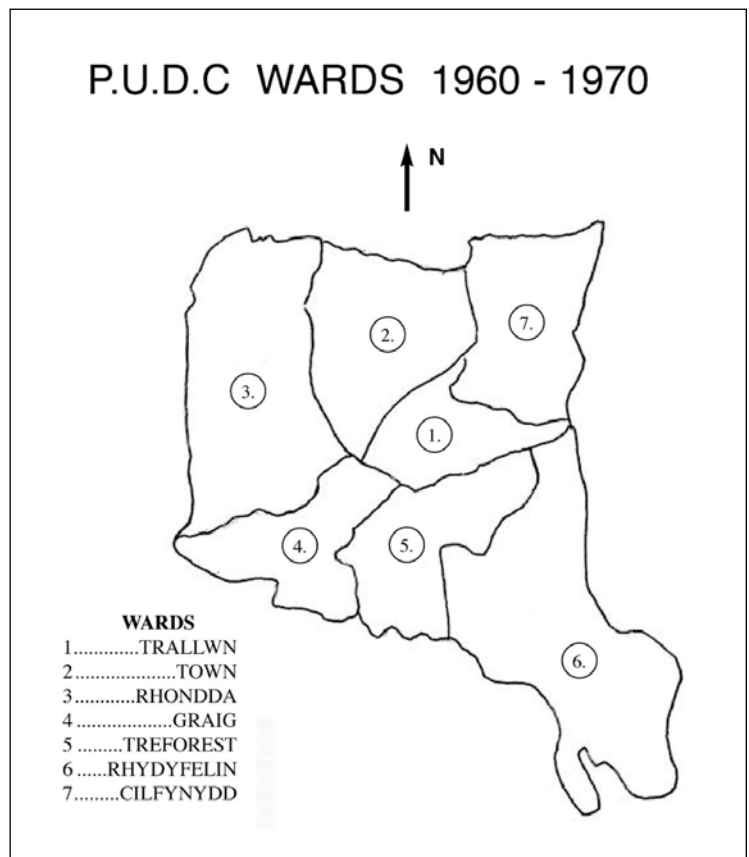
Meanwhile, the two main parties were gearing up for the general election. Sitting MP Arthur Pearson argued that 'people like both the pace, content and extent of Labour's policies',²⁴ while the Conservatives' Kenneth Green-Wanstall argued that 'there is only one job for us to do during this election campaign, and this is to bring home to the electorate the gravity of the economic situation.'²⁵ In contrast, the local Liberals met and decided not to put up a candidate for the parliamentary election on 31 March. But they were in no way downcast – they decided that they would contest a PUDC by-election in the Rhondda ward on 7 April. Moreover, the 'meeting closed with a feeling that Liberalism in the area was now becoming really alive and energetic and was becoming the counter balance to the one party domination from which the town had suffered so far.'²⁶

In the event, Labour retained their seat in the by-election,²⁷ but the *Pontypridd Observer* was excited about the approaching May elections. Before nominations closed, the paper talked in its 22 April 1966 edition of 'Sensational Election Prospects – Four of the Seven Wards to be Contested'.²⁸ The following week it found its expectations exceeded as its headline proclaimed; 'Contests in Seven Wards – Liberals and Independents Present Arms'.²⁹

The front page of the *Pontypridd Observer* on 13 May told the story of the polling the day before: 'Shocks for Labour Party – Two Seats Lost, Others Held only Narrowly'. Labour had lost one seat to Liberal W. J. Griffiths in the Rhydyfelin ward, and another to the Independents in Treforest. The Town ward they retained by just eighty-seven votes against Derek G. Lewis, and Mary Edwards was returned with an increased majority in Trallwn, despite an all-out effort by the Labour Party.³⁰

With the elections barely over, Miss Edwards returned to the

Pontypridd
Urban District
Council wards

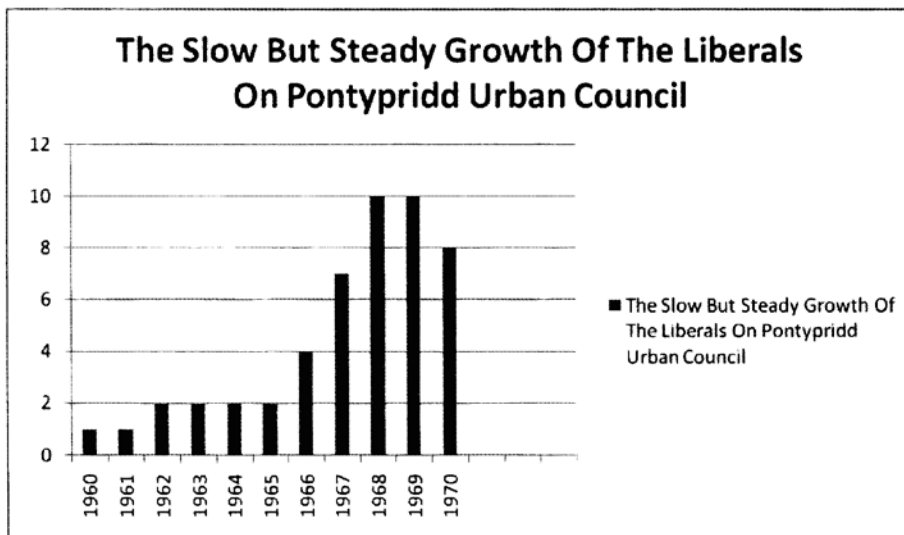


offensive. The following Tuesday, the council's treasurer asked for a resolution to be passed which would permit him and his deputy to audit the accounts of the Burial Board. A resolution ought to be passed each year, he said, but it had been many years since such a resolution had been made, and they were asking for this to be done now. The council agreed to put the item on a future agenda, but Miss Edwards intervened, saying that it seemed that discussion of the Burial Board in recent months had brought to light many 'customs', and this request to overturn a custom and return to the letter of the law would seem to indicate that there had been some 'irregularity' in the past. There was immediate uproar in the chamber, with Labour members rising to their feet, and Miss Edwards withdrew the word 'irregularity' unconditionally.³¹

The bitterness of the Labour Party was demonstrated by their decision soon afterwards to exclude all Independent and Liberal councillors from every committee and sub-committee at the council's annual meeting, leading Derek Lewis to state in a letter to the *Pontypridd Observer* that

'had I not seen this fiasco from the public gallery, I would not have believed it possible ... Would any thinking man agree that every Labour councillor is better suited for a committee than any Liberal or Independent councillor?'³² It seems that every Labour councillor *was* considered better than Liberals or Independents when the council decided to send three of its Labour members to Pontypridd's German twin town of Nurtlingen. Councillors W. J. Griffiths and Mary Edwards did not suggest sending members of other parties instead, but questioned the value of sending councillors at all. Representatives of local organisations would be much better, argued Miss Edwards.³³

But for Labour councillors used to their officers being politically on side there was worse to come. On 9 July 1966, Mary Edwards married Bernard Murphy, the Clerk to Pontypridd Urban District Council. The couple tied the knot at St Dyfrig's Roman Catholic Church, with a short service attended only by family members and intimate friends. The bride wore a light blue suit with white hat, and best man was Bernard's brother, Gerald. After the



ceremony the couple departed for Dover en route to a month-long honeymoon touring Europe and Morocco.³⁴

Back in Britain, the new Mrs Murphy was present in Llanidloes on 10 September for the formation of the new Welsh Liberal Party, created out of the merger of the old North Wales and South Wales Liberal Federations. This was a necessary move because, as Emlyn Hooson has pointed out, ‘the Liberal organization in Wales was a recipe for disaster,’³⁵ although Russell Deacon reminds us that the new arrangements were not popular in South Wales.³⁶

Elected to the post of chair of the new party, Mrs Murphy told the Llanidloes gathering of plans for a spring offensive in the council elections. ‘Wales has 33 yes-men in the Government,’ she said, referring to the tendency of Welsh Labour MPs to support the Labour Government whatever the circumstances. ‘It was,’ she went on, ‘about time [the Welsh people] were freed from them.’ The Liberals, she said, aimed to shape the destiny of Wales and beyond that, Britain and Europe.³⁷

And then it was back to the attack in Pontypridd. Mrs Murphy had been criticised by the Labour Party for what they said were her backward-looking views on council tenants who didn’t pay rates. This, according to one county councillor, John Howell-Davies, was what lay behind her attack on the composition of the Pontypridd Burial Board – councillors who were also tenants were

not ratepayers in the traditional sense of the word. ‘Labour councillors are endeavouring to be just and acting by modern-day standards in their determination that all classes of people, whether property owners, Council or private house tenants, be allowed to serve on this board.’³⁸ The criticism was vehemently denied by the then Miss Edwards, who pointed out that every member of the Burial Board could be a council tenant as long as he was a member of the local authority and the Board complied with the provisions of the 1933 Local Government Act, permitting its financial affairs to be subject to audit by a government auditor, which was not the case.³⁹

The PUDC Housing Committee had met and recommended that 536 houses built by the council at Glyntaff be offered for sale. Mrs Murphy argued that they should be offered for rent and that this would clear the council’s housing waiting list. ‘After meeting the needs of the people of Pontypridd then, and only then, should we think in terms of attracting people from outside the area.’ Developing her point, Mrs Murphy argued that by offering a form of rent differential, the council could attract all types of people into the area, ‘I reject this idea of concentrating one class of people in one housing estate, the so-called exec-admin professional type, and relegating people of lower incomes to another area. I believe in a mixed society ... mixed from every point of

view ... income, education, background ... anything you care to name.’⁴⁰

Mrs Murphy was supported by Reg Price, who pointed out that for many years the council had denied council tenants the opportunity to buy their own homes. This was an anomaly and moreover, the economy’s temperature was dropping, with colliery closures and the like. ‘To have an integrated society is precisely what we are here for.’ Labour obviously did not agree because Mrs Murphy’s motion was defeated by twenty-one votes to two.⁴¹

The national picture and 1967

The deteriorating state of the national economy had local ramifications. Welsh Secretary Cledwyn Hughes, on a visit to the Rhondda, adjacent to Pontypridd, found himself confronted by anti-unemployment demonstrators.⁴² The local newspaper itself, in an editorial, came out in favour of the location of the new Royal Mint in Llantrisant.⁴³ The council, meanwhile, passed a motion calling for a joint meeting between itself and adjoining local authorities, with the prime minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State for Wales and the president of the Board of Trade.

Mrs Murphy described this resolution as ‘the most shattering indictment of the Member of Parliament for this area.’ She went on to say that she could not ‘recall any particular push or activity on his part for the crying need for new industries ... for something like the Royal Mint.’ Referring to the MP’s canvassing in a local election the previous May, she said, ‘But a year ago he was devoting his energies to prevent another Liberal from returning to this council chamber. I think it would have been more to the point if he was invited to the meeting tonight. It would have been personal testimony to his complete and utter ineffectiveness as a representative of this area.’⁴⁴ The MP, Arthur Pearson, reacted angrily, saying that the attack was ‘mere political spleen. I am sure that “Murphyised” buckets of political muck will not assist in bringing either a

new Royal Mint or other industries into the area.⁴⁵ A few weeks later it was announced that the Mint would go to Llantrisant.⁴⁶

The local Liberals meanwhile were proceeding with their plans for the continuing assault on Labour. The press announced that the Liberals' annual dinner was to be held at the Gourmet Restaurant on 16 February 1967, with Welsh Liberal President Edward Davies as the guest speaker. At the same time, Mrs Murphy's public profile was to receive a further boost from appearing on television twice in four days: on the BBC Wales programme *Disgwyl Cwmni* (Expecting Company) in which she talked about the role of magistrates courts; and then on the same channel's *Llwyfan* (Platform) in which invited representatives of political parties debated and answered questions from the public.⁴⁷

And another front was to be opened up. Referring to the fact that Labour nominees to the Glamorgan County Council were regularly returned unopposed in the area, Mrs Murphy said, 'I feel that the County Council affects the lives of ordinary people more directly even than the government on a national level. There are so many things which are causing me concern, particularly in the field of education and planning. I seriously think it is high time that some opposition was registered on the County Council, rather than the situation at present whereby more than 80 members seem to have to kow-tow to the dictates of a small caucus who have been in power for far too long.'⁴⁸

In April the Liberals fought two of the four county seats. Derek Lewis polled well in the Town-Graig division but was beaten by Labour by 1,515 votes to 1,125. In Cilfynydd & Trallwn, Labour beat Mrs Murphy by 1,821 to 1,544, but the victor, W. Edryd Lewis, was reappointed as an alderman and this necessitated a by-election six weeks later.⁴⁹ Mrs Murphy stood again, but the margin of victory of the locally popular Labour candidate, Emrys Peck, was greater than on the previous occasion: 1,999 votes to 1,409.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the overall Liberal performance in the county contests was impressive,

and was certainly better than the result obtained by Plaid Cymru in its first outing on the Pontypridd electoral scene. Their candidate in the Rhondda ward had been beaten by 1,350 to 708, a margin of nearly two to one.⁵¹

But the real battle was for Pontypridd, and the local press was excited. 'It has been a case of alert status on the local political front this week in preparation for next Thursday's battle in the urban district council elections,' the *Pontypridd Observer* declared on its front page the first week of May.⁵² 'And make no mistake, the Labour Party is leaving nothing to chance. Their opponents are at the gates of the socialist citadel.'

The following week the newspaper headline said: 'Jolt for Labour – Three Liberal Gains'. Reg Green had won in Trallwn to take a third Liberal seat in that ward, by 1,065 to 868. In the Rhyd-yfelin ward two seats were up for grabs, and the Liberal Arthur Davies came second to take a seat. The top-placed Labour candidate received 1,857 votes to the Liberal's 1,565, while the second Labour candidate polled just 1,399. And in the Town ward, Derek Lewis won at his second attempt, ousting Labour by 974 votes to 794.⁵³ Labour were not happy and shortly afterwards the constituency party asked Transport House for advice on 'the unsatisfactory relationship between Mrs Murphy and the Town Clerk.' Mrs Murphy was phlegmatic, waving the matter aside with her observation that 'if I were a member of the Labour Party there would be no criticism.'⁵⁴

High tide

1968 was not a good year for the Labour Party at a national level. The recent devaluation, the credit squeeze, the balance of payments, and the incomes policy all acted to severely dent the government's popularity. Local MP Arthur Pearson spoke at the Trallwn Labour hall of 'the long and hard road to national solvency.'⁵⁵ And Mrs Murphy was not slow to take advantage of Labour's discomfiture. She accused the council's housing committee of dilatoriness in considering the matter of a tender for the construction of 505

houses at Glyncoch.⁵⁶ She raised the question of whether there was any benefit to be gained from the expense of sending councillors – Labour ones – to national and other conferences.⁵⁷ The front page headline of the 15 February edition of the *Pontypridd Observer* announced: '£32,000 Loss on Buses Expected', and Mrs Murphy declared the situation 'horrifying', while Derek Lewis called for independent consultants to be brought in to tackle the situation.⁵⁸ Mrs Murphy was not slow to attack the increase in local taxation. 'Up Go the Rates – County Mainly to Blame', said the *Pontypridd Observer* on its front page a few weeks later, adding 'Figures Excessive Declares Mrs Murphy'.⁵⁹

The *Pontypridd Observer* described the May polls as 'the most exciting elections for many years.'⁶⁰ Cilfynydd was to be contested by newcomer Colin Purcell, the ward having been subject to the unopposed returns of Labour candidates for many years. In the event, Labour's George Paget beat the Liberal in that ward, by 855 to 472, but elsewhere there was victory, causing the *Pontypridd Observer* to headline its front page 'Sensational Liberal Hat Trick'.⁶¹

The Liberals won a fourth seat in Trallwn; a second seat in Town – 789 to Labour's 551 and Plaid Cymru's 403; and a seat in the Graig ward, where two seats were being contested. The top Labour candidate gained 722 votes, while the Liberal, Carrick A. Rees came second with 684, and the bottom-placed Labour candidate got 513. In addition, Leslie Broom, the by-election victor, held on in Rhyd-yfelin.

This was a significant result because, with an Independent winning a third seat in Treforest, the Labour majority on the council had been shaved to just one vote; fourteen Labour councillors to ten Liberals and three Independents, the latter two groups seeing eye to eye on many issues.⁶² How far this was due to local campaigning, and how much to national factors, is matter of conjecture. Certainly the Liberals campaigned hard, but Labour in 1968 was incredibly unpopular and performed badly across the UK, losing such towns as Sheffield

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and Sunderland for the first time since the war.⁶³ In Wales, the *South Wales Echo* missed the events in Pontypridd, talking instead of the Labour Party fighting a double challenge from the Conservatives and Plaid Cymru, with 600 candidates contesting 328 seats in borough and urban council seats across the principality.⁶⁴

This was, of course, in the days before the Liberal Party had embraced community politics at its 1970 Assembly, but the Liberal campaigns in Pontypridd were certainly vigorous, and involved being seen around the ward, knocking on doors, dealing with case work, attending public meetings, visiting pubs and clubs, and even breaking the convention of distributing just one leaflet during an election campaign. In fact, Derek Lewis recalls being criticised by a Labour opponent for putting out *two* leaflets during a campaign.⁶⁵ And of course, the detailed accounts of the Liberal–Labour confrontations in the council chamber that were carried by the *Pontypridd Observer*, which was widely read, carried the implicit message that ‘the Liberals work all year round, not just at election time.’

Derek Lewis was press officer for the Pontypridd Liberals, and also held the position of chairman of the Young Liberals. As such, he contributed regularly to the letters pages of the *Pontypridd Observer*, sallying forth on topics such as Plaid Cymru’s unrealistic notions of an independent Wales, and the Vietnam war. On this latter issue Lewis criticised an anti-war petition circulating in the town because, he said, it avoided any mention of North Vietnamese aggression and was, in effect, an invitation to back a Communist dictatorship.⁶⁶

Under his direction the Young Liberals engaged in a number of activities such as sailing a raft down the River Taff as part of a publicity and fundraising exercise; taking photographs of the coal tips above Cilfynydd, which many residents were worried about after the Aberfan disaster; and hiring a bus in the summer of 1968 for a YL delegation to deliver a letter to 10 Downing Street, an act that enraged the local Labour Party.⁶⁷ Lewis’s fondest memory, though,

is of taking young activists in cars to campaign for Wallace Lawler in the successful Birmingham Ladywood parliamentary by-election in June 1969.

1969 dawned with Labour still unpopular, and Arthur Pearson declaring his intention to not seek re-election to parliament. The Liberal offensive continued, with the Liberals opposing a plan to replace a Welsh place name with an English one. Despite speaking the language Mary Murphy was often accused of being anti-Welsh, and felt it necessary to explain her position in the council chamber: ‘I am totally against stuffing the Welsh language down peoples’ throats,’ she said, ‘but here we have a perfectly good place name like Graigwen, and to change it to White Rock is certainly not conforming to the traditions of Pontypridd, since this is part of the district and a well-known place name here.’ Labour member George Paget disagreed on the basis that ‘90 per cent of the population of the town do not speak Welsh.’⁶⁸

The Liberal campaign in the council chamber included ‘bread-and-butter’ ward issues such as unmade roads – ‘blots on the landscape’⁶⁹ – as well as drains in the Town ward.⁷⁰ There were also issues of wider import, such as the plans for a new bus station, which the Liberals opposed at that particular time⁷¹ and battles over Labour’s exclusion of the press from council meetings.⁷²

One particular action of the Liberal leader nearly provoked a strike, or so it was alleged by Labour councillor George Paget. Mrs Murphy explained it thus in the council chamber: ‘I was disturbed to see an employee in council uniform come out of a public house, go into a betting shop, and re-enter the public house. I approached him and asked him courteously if he was on duty.’ Labour councillor Sam Davies responded to this by labelling Mrs Murphy’s actions as ‘Gestapo Tactics’.⁷³

The Liberal line-up of candidates for the May elections included a number of young people. Colin Purcell, standing once more in Cilfynydd was only twenty-eight years of age, as was the party’s candidate in the

Rhondda ward. In Rhydyfelin, Miss Pat Troman was just thirty; and the youngest candidate was aiming to win the third seat in the Town ward – Miss Elizabeth For-est being just twenty-three.⁷⁴

Despite the hyperbole of the local press – ‘The Most Exciting Election for Decades’⁷⁵ – the result was a disappointment. There were no gains, and the Liberals failed to win the third Town ward seat by just seven votes. Labour polled 707 to the Liberal’s 700 votes, while a Plaid candidate received 473.⁷⁶

The tide goes out

1970 witnessed three sets of elections in Pontypridd, and the first set was for Glamorgan County Council. As in 1967, the Liberals decided to contest two of the four county seats within the PUDC area. Mary Murphy stood in a different ward, the Town-Graig division, and was beaten by Labour by 1,626 to 1,402, while in Treforest & Rhydyfelin Labour beat Liberal W. J. Griffiths by 1,692 to 1,354. The party claimed not to be disappointed, pointing to the increase of 200 votes in the Town-Graig contest. Mrs Murphy declared that organisational problems had been identified and that these would be rectified for the forthcoming PUDC elections.⁷⁷

And then there was a bombshell – Derek Lewis announced that he would not be standing again in the Town ward. His decision had been taken on the basis of medical advice and in order to keep his business going, but he hoped, he said, to return as a Liberal in the future.⁷⁸ The Town ward was one of two losses suffered by the Liberals in May, as Labour regained the seat with 792 votes to the Liberal tally of 704, with Plaid bringing up the rear with 348. In Rhydyfelin, two seats were at stake and both Labour candidates finished well ahead of the Liberals – 1,440 and 1,405 as opposed to 983 and 928.⁷⁹

There was one more campaign ahead, and that was for the general election on 18 June, which the Liberals decided to contest, with Mary Murphy as the candidate. ‘Liberals think the election ought to be about the quality of life in this country, and looking after

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those who are getting the rough end of the stick,' declared Mrs Murphy.⁸⁰ The candidate was her usual hyperactive self. The *Pontypridd Observer* reported that she had 'been canvassing energetically in the vale [of Glamorgan] and during the final week spent more time in the Pontypridd urban area.'⁸¹

The result was a clear victory for Labour's new candidate Brynmor John, with 28,814 votes, and the Conservatives came second with 8,205. But Mrs Murphy had scored a creditable 6,871 at her first attempt, with Plaid Cymru in fourth place on 5,059.⁸²

Conclusions

The most obvious lesson to be drawn from the unique (at least in terms of industrial South Wales) experience of the Liberals in Pontypridd during the latter part of the 1960s is that campaigning reaps rewards in terms of electoral success. Admittedly, some of the gains could be put down to national factors such as Labour's unpopularity, but it is clear that hard-working candidates, together with a high profile in the local media, combined to deliver a crop of council seats to the party in the town. It might be argued that the high point of 1968 and 1969, followed by a fallback in 1970 indicates the predominant role of national factors, and that, with the election of a Conservative government, voters would turn again to Labour. But the experience of the Liberal party elsewhere in the UK, as evidenced from strong by-election performances at Rochdale and at Chester-le-Street in County Durham⁸³ suggests that it was not impossible to win against Labour even under the circumstances of the 1970–74 Heath government.

Another factor that could be adduced to explain the increasing difficulties for the Liberals in Pontypridd was the organisation of and fielding of candidates by Plaid Cymru from 1967 onwards, slowly at first and then at an increasing pace. However, the presence of nationalist candidates need not have caused insuperable problems for the Liberals in Pontypridd. After all, in many parts of England, three-cornered contests

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were common, with the Conservatives being the third party, and that did not rule out Liberal success. And, of course, the Conservatives themselves were never very strong in Pontypridd and only contested elections at the parliamentary level.

Local government reorganisation after 1972 seems to have acted to prevent the Liberals ever coming close to controlling the new Taff-Ely authority, which was an enlarged district council created as a result of Pontypridd being amalgamated with other local authorities. However, there was nothing inevitable about the Liberals' lack of local government success in the locality during the new decade. The Liberals simply failed to organise and campaign outside the old Pontypridd Urban District area, and this was a matter of choices, conscious or unconscious. The leadership demonstrated by Mary Murphy in the late 1960s was a two-edged sword; lack of leadership can be blamed for the party's failure to organise properly in the areas formerly covered by the old Llantrisant and Llantwit Fardre Rural District Council, and leadership of the anti-Labour forces went de facto to Plaid Cymru and rate-payers' groups, who *did* organise in these areas. It is clear that the Liberal Party in Pontypridd at this time was less of an institution and more of a personal coterie centred around Mary Murphy. Derek Lewis, for example, does not recall ever paying a membership subscription or possessing a membership card.⁸⁴ The lesson to be learned is that the Liberal successes in Pontypridd in the 1960s, and the failure to build on them after 1970, were both the result of choices by local party activists, and not the outcome of inevitable historical forces.

Mary Murphy continued in local government as member of both the new borough and county councils, and stood for parliament again in the two 1974 general elections. She stood down from the county in 1985 and from the borough the following year, and moved to the south coast of England.

Steve Belzak is a university lecturer. He represented Cilfynydd, the ward

the Liberals failed to win in the 1960s, at various levels of local government between 1983 and 2008, first as SDP and then as Liberal Democrat.

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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65)

Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden). Dr Anthony Howe, School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk.

The Lib-Lab Pact

The period of political co-operation which took place in Britain between 1977 and 1978; PhD research project at Cardiff University. Jonny Kirkup, 29 Mount Earl, Bridgend, Bridgend County CF31 3EY; jonnykirkup@yahoo.co.uk.

'Economic Liberalism' and the Liberal (Democrat) Party, 1937–2004

A study of the role of 'economic liberalism' in the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats. Of particular interest would be any private papers relating to 1937's *Ownership For All* report and the activities of the Unservile State Group. Oral history submissions also welcome. Matthew Francis; matthew@the-domain.org.uk.

The Liberal Party's political communication, 1945–2002

Research on the Liberal party and Lib Dems' political communication. Any information welcome (including testimonies) about electoral campaigns and strategies. Cynthia Messleka-Boyer, 12 bis chemin Vaysse, 81150 Terssac, France; +33 6 10 09 72 46; cynthia.boyer@univ-jfc.fr.

Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16

Andrew Gardner, 17 Upper Ramsey Walk, Canonbury, London N1 2RP; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.

Liberal Unionists

A study of the Liberal Unionist party as a discrete political entity. Help with identifying party records before 1903 particularly welcome. Ian Cawood, Newman University College, Birmingham; i.cawood@newman.ac.uk.

The Liberal Party in the West Midlands December 1916 – 1923 election

Focusing on the fortunes of the party in Birmingham, Coventry, Walsall and Wolverhampton. Looking to explore the effects of the party split at local level. Also looking to uncover the steps towards temporary reunification for the 1923 general election. Neil Fisher, 42 Bowden Way, Binley, Coventry CV3 2HU; neil.fisher81@ntlworld.com.

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935

Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.

The political career of Edward Strutt, 1st Baron Belper

Strutt was Whig/Liberal MP for Derby (1830–49), later Arundel and Nottingham; in 1856 he was created Lord Belper and built Kingston Hall (1842–46) in the village of Kingston-on-Soar, Notts. He was a friend of Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of free trade and reform, and held government office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Commissioner of Railways. Any information, location of papers or references welcome. Brian Smith; brian63@inbox.com