



Richard Livsey died in September 2010. He was elected Liberal MP for Brecon & Radnor in the 1985 by-election, lost the seat in 1992 and then regained it in 1997. On standing down in 2001, he was ennobled as Baron Livsey of Talgarth.

He led the Welsh Liberal Democrats from 1988 to 1992 and from 1997 to 2001. As well as being a central figure in Welsh Liberal politics, his main success was to build Brecon & Radnor into a Liberal Democrat stronghold; it is now represented by Kirsty Williams in the Welsh Assembly and by Roger Williams in Westminster. **Russell Deacon** interviewed him in March 2003.

# LIVSEY

*What are your earliest political memories?*

I can recall the 1945 general election when I was ten years old. My memories of the time are around the Brecon and Radnor constituency. In that wartime election, a former miner, Tudor Watkins, was the victorious Labour candidate. Oscar Guest was the Conservative candidate. He had previously been the Coalition Liberal MP for Loughborough and was a first cousin of Winston Churchill. To a ten year old he came across as very formal. The Liberal candidate, David Lewis, was a Breconshire county councillor and later chairman of the Education Committee. We came a distant third then with less than half of the vote of Tudor Watkins. Although the constituency party was sound at that time, mainly under Alderman Lewis's guidance, we wouldn't fight the seat there for another decade. Breconshire was very political but was always split three ways between the three political parties.

The big influence on the Liberals was T. O. Davies, Principal of Tregan College, an active Liberal by nature and family tradition, a Nonconformist. In rural Wales the Nonconformists were Liberal, in Glamorgan and Monmouthshire and industrial areas they were Labour. Politics at that time had polarised into Labour and Liberal areas depending on your religion.

*What are your earliest campaigning memories?*

I think they were the direct action campaigns in Brecon and Radnor. These were over reservoirs they were planning to build to supply water to England. I was inspired by the passion that those campaigning had to defend the countryside that they loved.

During this period (1945–60) I came across a number of the Liberal political legends of the post-war period. I got to know Professor Seaborne Davies, the Liberal MP who had taken over David Lloyd George's old Caernarvon Boroughs seat for a brief period in 1945. I met

him as he was conducting a Commission on the establishment of an Agricultural College for Wales. Although we didn't speak much politics, I was impressed by him both as a speaker and listener.

Another Liberal I came across was Roderic Bowen MP (Cardiganshire 1945–1966). He was very good speaker at Liberal Party meetings, but his legal career interfered with his political life. He had established a good reputation for helping campaign on social issues. When he became a Deputy Speaker in the House of Commons he distanced himself from the party in Wales and elsewhere. We never saw him after he lost his seat in 1966. He didn't even contact Geraint Howells when he won his old seat back again in 1974.

Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris (Carmarthenshire 1945–1957) was a sound middle-of-the-road Liberal. He was greatly respected across Wales but was, on the whole, an independent-minded MP. Morris was the first MP to make a speech against the monoculture

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of softwood trees when they were being planted in Wales in the 1950s. His concern for the countryside greatly impressed me. Both he and Roderic Bowen were mainly concerned with their own seats and legal careers and therefore we didn't see them much elsewhere in Wales.

The Montgomeryshire MP and Liberal Party leader Clement Davies had a huge influence on Brecon and Radnor. He was also keen on establishing a Welsh parliament, as was I. This appeal to the Welsh cause meant also that natural Plaid Cymru voters came over to him. Davies spoke a lot around Wales about the need for a Welsh parliament and many other Liberal causes. Although he wasn't always that good a speaker, he could draw a substantial crowd. I recall one meeting in 1959 in Builth Wells in which we had over 300 people in attendance. Davies was also a practical politician planning for the future. In this respect he selected Emlyn Hooson as his successor three years before his death. This helped Emlyn build up his profile in the seat and go on to win it in 1962. Our first post-war by-election win.

*Your own involvement in politics up to 1979?*

I was asked to be a candidate in 1960 for Brecon and Radnor but I couldn't get the money needed to fight the seat. This meant that there was no Liberal candidate in 1964, just as there hadn't been one in 1959. The campaigning I was involved in was therefore nearly always in other constituencies. The 1966 Carmarthen by-election which launched Plaid Cymru's Gwynfor Evans on the political scene was one us Welsh Liberals felt we could have won. Hywel Davies, our candidate, was a well-known ITV commentator (also Welsh speaking, and local). I had written a letter to Liberal News the week before the election stating that the Liberals had lost contact with the locals and therefore couldn't expect to win the seat. This was published on the same day as the election result showed us coming a distant third. I think as Welsh Liberals this was probably our lowest point.

After being a development officer for ICI between 1961 and 1967, I became a farm manager on Blairdrummond Estate in Perthshire for nearly four years. Whilst up in

Scotland I fought the Perth and East Perthshire constituency in the 1970 general election. I came fourth but managed to get over 3,000 votes in a traditional Unionist seat.

Whereas Jo Grimond had caused something of a political revival in Scotland this wasn't occurring in Wales. I reflected hard on what was happening in Scotland. Here I found the organisation in many ways similar, but the constituencies were much further ahead in their planning. In the Welsh elections Geraint Howells fought Brecon and Radnor and was the first Liberal candidate there since 1955. After his experience in Brecon and Radnor, Geraint decided to reorganise the Welsh party. Policy formulation became more structured. Hooson was being asked to do too much. He was Defence spokesman, Welsh party leader and there were only six Liberal MPs at Westminster then.

A Welsh Office Liberal Party headquarters was established in Aberystwyth, an organiser was appointed called Emlyn Thomas. He organised the party well for the first year but following that it was done badly, the money dried up and bills weren't paid. Thomas later became a Conservative and stood against Geraint in 1979, coming second. It was Emlyn and Hooson's revival of the party that was crucial in Geraint's 1974 victory, retaking the Carmarthen seat. The political impetus came from Emlyn and the practical from Geraint, although much of their campaigning only had an impact in rural Wales and we failed to progress into urban Wales.

In the autumn of 1973, I was interviewed by the Brecon and Radnor Liberal Association and I was approved as a candidate. In the end I had to decline their invitation because of my academic studies. I then went to Reading University to undertake an agricultural course there, an MSc; during this time the lecturer Dr Noel K. Thomas was selected to fight the Brecon and Radnor seat in 1974. In the first election that year he improved slightly on Geraint's 1970 result by getting nearly 20 per cent of the vote, but in the second election his vote fell back again. I wasn't in Brecon and Radnor for that election, however, as I had gone to Cardigan to help Geraint Howells win the seat. He defeated Elystan Morgan (Labour MP). He did this because Howells in

the late 1960s and early 1970s gained a lot of support on Welsh issues in the seat. Elystan Morgan was at the time seen as the 'bright young hope of the Labour Party' in Wales. Morgan a decade before had left Plaid Cymru, which caused much bitterness amongst Plaid Cymru supporters and therefore Geraint was able to capitalise on the Plaid Cymru vote. Plaid Cymru never forgave Morgan for leaving the party. Geraint was a shrewd political operator, he knew exactly what was going on and drew the vote to him.

*What did you do in the St David's Day Welsh Assembly referendum of 1979?*

I did most of my campaigning in Pembrokeshire where I had also now been selected as the parliamentary candidate. Before the election I had spoken in a debate at Haverfordwest with both Dafydd Wigley MP and Denzil Davies MP. In the debate, because I wasn't an MP, I ended up being the sixth speaker. By the time I got to speak the others had said everything worth saying both for and against the referendum. I therefore just spoke about my rural upbringing and why I would have to leave Wales to get a decent job if the Assembly wasn't forthcoming. I went out campaigning most often with a teacher called Alan Evans. He would later on that year be the unsuccessful Labour candidate for Pembroke, the same seat I was standing in (he would later join the SDP). We went around every door in Mathry trying to draw up support and all said 'no'. Evans was disgusted and kept on saying 'Bloody No-voting Welsh speakers'. We thought at least the Welsh speakers would support an Assembly but we were wrong.

On the night of the 1 March 1979 at the referendum count, I was the only 'Yes' representative at the Tenby count. It was forty-five minutes before I saw a 'Yes' vote. Most Liberal voters and everyone else voted 'No'. Only the box from the village of Maenclochog was overwhelming 'Yes'. In hindsight I felt it was the wrong time for a referendum. It was simply used as a way of voting against an unpopular Labour government and Tories milked this fully.

In that year's election it soon became clear that the Lib-Lab pact, although it was now over, hadn't gone down at all well in Wales. We

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Liberals were seen to prop them up. We were tarred with the same brush as Labour and as a result we went backwards in Wales electorally, with Emlyn losing his Montgomeryshire seat and Geraint being our sole MP.

*What do you remember of the rise of Alliance?*

Due to the poor leadership of Michael Foot (Bleanau Gwent) a lot of people were attracted to the new politics of the Liberals. The SDP were a totally different type of people. Some were quite aggressive; others were quite friendly; many had absolutely no experience of politics at all. What they did give us was an important new impetus. This was because many were active in the world of business and they also had a large membership on the ground in the south-Wales urban constituencies which we hadn't been in for decades. They were also well up in publishing, printing and campaigning techniques, which the Liberals in Wales often lacked. The balance of membership in rural seats, however, still remained predominantly Liberal. In Brecon and Radnorshire, for example, I recall there were 150 Liberal members in and 1983 and twenty-seven SDP. In a 1981 I became Brecon and Radnor candidate.

In 1982 there was a by-election in the Gower constituency caused by the death of the Labour MP, Ifor Davies. It was the first trial of strength for the SDP in Wales. This was very much an SDP election; Mark Soady was probably the election agent. The campaign was run by the SDP, with the Liberals only helping to campaign. However, Gwynoro Jones, the SDP candidate, was still remembered as Labour defector and the Conservative candidate was able to split the vote between us and them. The fact that Gareth Wardell, the Labour candidate, was known in the seat beforehand (he had been agent there) helped Labour. He was also quite popular locally. Thatcher's post-Falklands-War popularity also helped split the vote to the Tories. Gwynoro came second with a quarter of the vote but he was still way behind Wardell.

*How did you progress into Brecon and Radnor as the candidate?*

In 1979, the constituency had been split as to whether to select

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a candidate at all. The subsequent bitterness between both sides took some time to heal, and I was instrumental in bringing the two sides back together. It was at this time that I was selected to be their next candidate and I started to build up the constituency there, with the help of Geraint. I was still, at this time, working in the Welsh College of Agriculture at Llanbadarn Fawr.

In 1982 there was a meeting of the Boundary Commission to review the boundaries of Montgomeryshire, and Brecon and Radnorshire. This was in Llandrindod Wells. Labour wanted the existing boundaries kept. This included the strong Labour supporting areas of Brynmawr and Cefn Coed (Merthyr Tydfil). There were about 10,000 Labour votes there. Tom Hooson, the sitting Conservative MP argued for Brecon to go in with Monmouth, which would have created an enormous Conservative stronghold. Radnorshire would go to Montgomery, which would make Montgomery a Conservative seat. Councillor Gareth Morgan and myself both submitted evidence saying 'this is ridiculous, there are five local authorities currently operating in Brecon and Radnorshire and the new constituency should follow the boundaries of the existing county'. This was what the Commission implemented and the result was that the political centre of gravity was changed away from the Labour urban areas to the rural ones. Then in the following year's election I came a close third to Labour's David Morris, yet Tom Hooson still had a massive majority of nearly 9,000 votes.

For the more famous 1985 by-election I had already been working the seat for some time. I was still working in Aberystwyth prior to the by-election. I was walking down The Parade when a car pulled up and the window rolled down. It was Geraint Howells. He told me that Tom Hooson was seriously ill and that I should prepare for a by-election. He was right, as Hooson died shortly afterwards.

At the end of May I was selected as the Liberal candidate for the seat once more. Geraint backed me from the very start of the campaign to its end, he always insisted that we could do it. Years later there was an assumption that Brecon and Radnor, like Montgomeryshire

and Cardiganshire had always had a strong Liberal tradition but this was not the case. We hadn't held a seat there since before the war.

I was helped in winning the by-election by a number of factors:

- I had strong family connections with the seat: my father had been born in Brecon and my mother had been a headmistress and a teacher in Talgarth, a town in the constituency.
- I had built up the constituency organisation and had spent the previous two years both getting to know the constituency and getting those in the constituency to be aware of me.
- I was able to get the full support of the Liberal-Alliance and able to get the help of one of the most senior Liberals, Andrew Ellis, as my agent.
- The successful review of the boundaries had removed a lot of the Labour vote and made the seat far more vulnerable to the Liberal vote.
- The previous Labour candidate, David Morris, who had come second in the seat in 1983, had now been elected to the European Parliament. This meant that Labour's new candidate Dr Richard Willey would not have the time to develop the constituency. In addition Willey was closeted from the press through much of the campaign, as the Labour Party had become fearful of what it saw as a mainly Tory press. Perhaps this was something to with Peter Mandelson, as this was also his first election contest for Labour.
- The final piece of good news was the fact that although the Welsh Conservatives wanted the election in September or October in order to build up the chances for their candidate, Dr Chris Butler, the Conservative government actually moved the writ on 10 June for it to be on 4 July. Butler had no direct link with the constituency and would be unable to build much of a rapport with the voters in the few weeks he had left to campaign. During the campaign we concentrated our campaigning against the Conservatives. Towards the end of the campaign the polls were

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indicating that it was between us and Labour. We made sure that we visited every farm and house in the constituency. Something the others just didn't do. David Steel was really supportive in the campaign and attracted huge crowds to listen to him speak. When the election occurred on 'Independence Day', 4 July 1985, we beat Labour by 554 votes. The Tories were more than 3,000 votes behind. This was a great election victory not only for me and the Welsh Liberals, but also for the Alliance across the UK.

*What do you remember of the 1987 general election and the subsequent Liberal-SDP merger?*

I think it would have been better in 1987 if there had been no independent SDP. The Alliance was no longer as strong as it had been, and standing as a Liberal candidate proved to be of a better advantage. We no longer had the money and resources we once had. Both Labour and the Conservatives heavily outspent us in this election in Wales and the results showed.

We had to merge because there was no longer any reason to be apart. The Liberals, however, retained the dominant position in Wales. The SDP weren't able to get any MPs and few councillors elected in Wales. Although most of the SDP merged in Wales easily, the continued existence of the Owenites muddied the waters. At the Richmond by-election in England, the SDP helped the Liberals lose and William Hague get in for the Conservatives. There was also a huge hostility to them across Wales. Many in the Labour Party hated what they saw as the 'SDP traitors'. Liberals were not treated with the same brush and we retained more cordial relations with Labour MPs.

*Why did you become leader of the Welsh party in 1988?*

I said that the leadership was too early for me at this time, but Geraint Howells insisted. I wanted the party to be a great deal more organised. I wanted it to cover the whole of Wales. I wanted to get MPs elected in Cardiff, Swansea and Wrexham to join the rural Liberal Democrats. The old division in Wales, which had occurred between the North and South Wales Liberals federations continued in practice,

with a split between the north and south. I was keen to remove this barrier: I wanted to get rural and urban members in – and to get more women in. When I was leader more women contested elections for the Liberals than ever before. This helped them get valuable experience although it wasn't until 1999 and the Welsh Assembly elections that we got our first females elected.

*Why were you the only Welsh MP in 1988 not to support Alan Beith in the federal leadership election over Paddy Ashdown?*

I was a close friend of Alan Beith but I still believed that Ashdown had greater potential. He was a different kind of leader. Steel had got involved in Wales during election times; his helicopter tours to Ceredigion during election time were very useful. Ashdown was much more active within Wales, though. There was a large Liberal faction in favour of Beith in Wales, as he was seen as a traditional Liberal. Ashdown's disciplined lifestyle, however, had made him a greater political force. Therefore I got involved in Ashdown's campaign from the very start. During the campaign we met in his flat in London every morning. Thankfully, although the first few years were not that fruitful, Ashdown's leadership provided us with some of our greatest post-war successes.

*In the 1989 Pontypridd by-election Tom Ellis lost his deposit; Frank Levers lost his in the 1989 Vale of Glamorgan by-election. Yet Frances David gained a quarter of the vote in the 1991 Monmouth by-election. Why was this?*

I went and campaigned in all three of these Welsh by-elections, on an almost daily basis. In Pontypridd, Labour's Dr Kim Howells was seen as being a very good candidate and a hard act to defeat. Although the seat had a strong Liberal tradition, Tom Ellis was seen as an outsider from the SDP. Labour resented this former Labour MP standing in the seat and this made them campaign all the harder.

In the Vale of Glamorgan, Frank Levers' lost deposit was quite a shock. The SDP had done well in the seat in 1987 general election. But for this election there were not enough activists in the constituency and this was reflected in the poor vote.

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In the Monmouthshire by-election, Frances David was suitable for a largely rural seat like this. She was an excellent candidate and a seasoned campaigner. People were fed up with the Tories at this time and they came across to us in droves. This was a much more rural seat like those we held in Mid Wales and we felt at home here. Frances's vote reflected this fact.

*In the 1992 general election you lost your seat and Geraint Howells lost his Ceredigion seat. Why was this?*

In Brecon and Radnorshire our vote actually increased, but so did the Conservatives', which meant that Jonathan Evans won. I felt that the issue of hunting had been the decisive factor. The Tories campaigned on this issue strongly. I had always been pro-hunting but this didn't become evident enough in the campaign and it cost me the vital votes I needed to keep the seat. Also, during the campaign I put too much time in as the Welsh party leader in other constituencies. This was at the expense of my own constituency and my support there suffered.

In Ceredigion it was felt that Geraint had stood for one election too many. Plaid Cymru also targeted the constituency and the hunting issue was important there too, transferring some votes to the Tories. We also had no idea that there would be such a surge in the Plaid Cymru vote. It was one of the largest swings to Plaid Cymru up until that time.

*How did you regain your Brecon and Radnorshire seat in 1997?*

After my defeat I spent a lot of time unemployed before I was able to find some work with the Agricultural Training Board. Then in 1985 I left the board and spent the next two and a half years working in the constituency. Both the Welsh and the Federal party targeted the seat, which gave us a lot of resource there. We were also able to do a private opinion poll in the seat that meant we could target the messages we needed to win the seat. The three agents I had in my career at Brecon and Radnorshire – Willie Griffith in 1983, Celia Thomas in 1987 and 1992, and finally James Gibson Watt in 1997 – were also instrumental in winning back the seat. When [in 1997] the result was announced the following day, it was the last result

in Wales. My victory there ensured that Wales became 'Tory free' for the first time since 1906.

*What was your role in the 1997 Welsh Assembly referendum?*

This referendum and the resulting 'Yes' vote majority, which led to the establishment of the Welsh Assembly, was the height of my political career. During the campaign the political parties worked well together. The eastern part of Wales in this campaign was still largely hostile to the idea of a Welsh Assembly. We had to campaign therefore to try and get as much of the 'Yes' vote out as possible. The legacy of Tory rule in Wales helped the 'Yes' campaign. The organisation of the 'Yes' campaign was also much better than the 'No' campaign. All of this helped us get a narrow 'Yes' win.

*Did you consider standing for the Welsh Assembly elections?*

I had considered standing myself for the Assembly but I felt I would be too old to stand in the 2003 elections, which was the first opportunity I had to stand down from Westminster. There would have been no point in starting a political career then. For the 1999 Assembly elections I thought Roger Williams would be the candidate for Brecon and Radnorshire. In the event Kirsty Williams became the candidate because she had campaigned so effectively in winning the nomination in 1998.

*In the 1999 Federal leadership election, why did you back Kennedy when the bulk of the Welsh party supported Hughes?*

I was a good personal friend of Simon Hughes. He was also a good friend of the Welsh party. Charles Kennedy, however, was a better-known television performer and he presented himself as a good and popular leader. He had a good knowledge of the rural economy, which was import to both me and Brecon and Radnorshire. I felt he was 'the right man for the time'.

*Professor Russell Deacon is lecturer in Politics and History at Coleg Gwent and an Honorary Research Fellow at Swansea University. He has written extensively on Welsh Liberal and Liberal Democrat history, including a full history of the party.*

# REPORT

## Survival and Success: Twenty-Five Years of the Liberal Democrats

Conference fringe meeting, 15 September 2013, with Duncan Brack, John Curtice, Mark Pack and Julie Smith; chair: Lord Ashdown

Report by **Douglas Oliver**

ON SUNDAY 15 September 2013, at the Liberal Democrat Conference in Glasgow, the History Group celebrated the party's first quarter-century with a discussion of its successes and failures, across a series of key criteria, in the years from its foundation on 3 March 1988.

Introducing the meeting from the chair, Paddy Ashdown – who was elected the party's first leader in July 1988 – spoke of the importance of history and of his admiration for the group's study of Liberal Democrat history: 'If we don't remember our past we are condemned to repeat it!' Ashdown reminded the 100-strong audience at the Campanile Hotel that the difficulties of the party's early years cast the party's current mid-term-government unpopularity into a relatively positive light; in the late 1980s, after the party's formation from the remnants of the Alliance, the position of the Social and Liberal Democrats in one opinion poll was above zero by a statistically insignificant amount, and in the spring of 1989, the party fell below the Green Party in elections to the European Parliament.

In order to cover the scope of the period, four themes were identified for discussion: party leadership; psephology; the nature of the Liberal Democrat voter; and the evolution in campaigning and the shape of policy. The four topics were introduced respectively by Duncan Brack, current vice-chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Policy Committee; well-known psephologist Professor John Curtice, of the University of Strathclyde; Mark Pack, former editor of the Liberal Democrat Voice blog and head of digital campaigning in the 2005 election; and Julie Smith, Cambridge

councillor and vice-chair of the Federal Policy Committee.

Duncan Brack outlined the scope of discussion. The seminar was designed to help build on topics discussed in the History Group's 2011 book *Peace, Reform and Liberation* and help ferment the thoughts of three of the speakers, in readiness for their contribution to a forthcoming special edition of the *Journal*.

In broad terms, Brack outlined six key reasons for the party's survival and improved circumstances from its unpropitious beginning in 1988. First, local government representation: the growing town hall base throughout the 1990s served as an important positive-conditioning factor affecting voters' attitudes to the party. Second, Westminster by-elections: victories in places like Eastbourne in 1990 and Brent East in 2006 were instrumental in developing the party's momentum and confidence. Third, targeting: a better focus on areas of political potential helped the party overcome its long-standing problem of vote dispersal. Fourth, leadership: the largely positive images held by Liberal Democrat leaders helped the party as a whole maintain a positive image. Fifth, policy: this provided a constructive foundation to back up and strengthen the public's favourable impression of the party. Finally, the decline of two-party politics: a broader factor affecting the party's status – and reinforced by the image of the party as seeking to rise above class politics – was the electorate's increasing eschewal of the Conservative and Labour parties, whose combined vote share fell to below two-thirds of the total in 2010.

Focusing on leadership, Brack argued that the media shadow cast by the Conservative and Labour