

## Liberals divided

Dr J. Graham Jones examines the February 1921 by-election in Cardiganshire, where Asquithian and Lloyd George Liberals engaged in bitter internecine warfare

# 'Every vote for Llewelyn Williams is a vote against Lloyd George'<sup>1</sup>

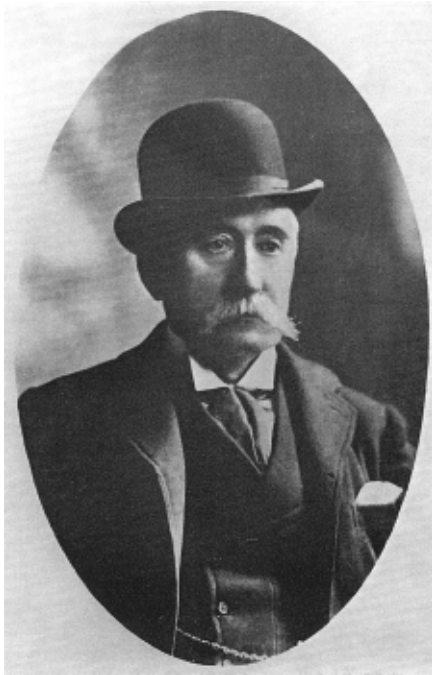
Llewelyn's opposed to national waste; So work for him with zeal and haste.'<sup>2</sup>

By the 1950s Welsh Liberals proudly referred to the Cardiganshire constituency as 'the safest seat held by a Liberal member'.<sup>3</sup> This remote, predominantly rural division on the western seaboard of Wales, so far removed from the hub of political life at Westminster, and first captured by the Liberals in the 'breaking of the ice' general election of 1868, was held continuously by the party from 1880 until the defeat of Roderic Bowen in 1966.<sup>4</sup> But this long tenure was not always characterised by political harmony, calm and tranquillity. During the early 1920s in particular, intensely bitter political controversy beset Cardiganshire. It was a deep-rooted conflict which left indelible scars for a whole generation and longer. The advent of 'total war' after 1914 had made a deep impression upon the life of the county. It inaugurated a period of redefinition and a crisis of deeply entrenched values caused by the pressures of world war, which undermined severely the traditional ethos embodied in nonconformist Liberalism.

The county's Liberal MP ever since 1895 had been Matthew Lewis Vaughan Davies, squire of Tanybwllch mansion near Aberystwyth, justifiably dubbed 'the silent backbencher' whose long, undistinguished tenure of the constituency had caused 'the most enervating torpor' to 'seize' the local Liberal Party.<sup>5</sup> During the later stages of the war persistent rumours circulated that the veteran MP was anxious to 'retire' to the upper house, and speculation ensued on the identity of his likely successor as Cardiganshire's representative in the House of Commons.

In October 1917 W. Llewelyn Williams, Liberal MP for the Carmarthen Boroughs since 1906, a former close associate of Lloyd George who had dramatically fallen out with him primarily over the need to introduce military conscription during 1916, wrote to Harry Rees, the secretary of the Cardiganshire Liberals. 'You will have seen that the Carmarthen Boros are going to be wiped out, & that I shall therefore be looking for a new seat either in Carm. or elsewhere. I should be glad to hear from you what are the prospects in Cardiganshire?'<sup>6</sup> Williams wrote in the certain knowledge that his own seat was about to disappear in the impending redistribution of parliamentary constituencies. In the event no peerage materialised for Vaughan Davies, and no parliamentary vacancy arose for Llewelyn Williams. Williams' fate was effectively sealed by the course of the famous Maurice Debate in the House of Commons in May 1918 when he was one of the ninety-eight Liberal MPs to enter the opposition lobby. 'Ll.G. is now definitely at the head of a Tory Gov[ernment]', he wrote defiantly to Harry Rees, '... Of course the Liberal Party will be split up again, but I don't fear the result. I am prepared, if necessary, to make an alliance with the Labour Party.'<sup>7</sup> As the war ran its course speculation persisted that Vaughan Davies, who had declared himself a supporter of Lloyd George in 1916, was likely to be awarded a peerage.

As it happened Vaughan Davies was returned to parliament unopposed in the 'coupon' general election held on the conclusion of hostilities, having received official endorsement from the coalition camp



Matthew Vaughan Davies (later Baron Ystwyth), MP for Cardiganshire 1895–1920

as early as the previous July.<sup>8</sup> There was some disquiet in Cardiganshire as a result of the MP's apparent ready endorsement of the coalition government. Vaughan Davies attempted to assuage local opposition by declaring his unwillingness to continue to support the coalition after the signing of the peace treaties if the government violated Liberal principles.<sup>9</sup> As the election loomed, Llewelyn Williams again doggedly staked his claim in the event of a vacancy:

There is a persistent rumour that Vaughan Davies will be raised to the peerage at the last moment, & a George man will be rushed in for Cardiganshire.

In such a case I want you to make it known that I should be willing to offer my services, as a Liberal, prepared to give loyal support to the Gov[ernment] until peace is declared, but prepared to fight them if they will try (as they declare) to play hanky-panky with Dis[establishment] & Imperial Preference, & try to perpetuate Conscription &c.

Should they run the thing very fine (they are capable of anything!) I could wire the £150 required to be deposited at nomination.<sup>10</sup>

In the event no vacancy arose and Vaughan Davies continued to represent the county in parliament for a little

over two years longer. In the autumn of 1919 H. H. Asquith was welcomed to Aberystwyth amidst scenes of great jubilation and enthusiasm.<sup>11</sup>

At long last, in the early days of 1921, the peerage anticipated for several years finally materialised: M. L. Vaughan Davies became Baron Ystwyth in the New Year's Honours List.<sup>12</sup> Already eighty years of age, with nigh on twenty-six years of continuous service in the Commons and recently elected as chairman of the Welsh Parliamentary Party, he was hailed in some circles as the 'doyen of Welsh political life' whose 'promotion' was 'rather overdue'.<sup>13</sup> The local Asquithian camp was less impressed. The Prime Minister was at once reminded that, as a reforming, radical Chancellor of the Exchequer back in 1909, intent on carrying his 'People's Budget', he had dismissed the upper chamber as 'purely a branch of the Tory organisation'. Now he stood accused of 'recklessly throw[ing] Cardiganshire into the turmoil and expense of an election'.<sup>14</sup> It was indeed contended from the outset that a keenly observed by-election lay in prospect, and it was soon realised that Vaughan Davies's elevation was primarily a device engineered by the Prime Minister to bring into parliament his own private secretary, Captain Ernest Evans, himself a native of Aberystwyth, a Welsh speaker, a barrister by profession and an erudite public speaker with extensive local connections.

It was noted, too, that 'Wee Free' (Asquithian) support was substantial within the county. Indeed Asquith had himself been considered a possible Liberal candidate for Cardiganshire only a short time earlier, before his return for Paisley in 1920. Local passions ran high against the notion that Lloyd George should consider the county Liberal Association the mere 'handmaiden' of an administration comprising mainly Unionist MPs whose good name had been tainted beyond hope of recovery by the atrocities of the Black and Tans in Ireland.<sup>15</sup>

Resentment increased as it became ever more apparent that the course of events had long been manipulated by the Prime Minister. When his wife Mrs Margaret Lloyd George had visited the

county in 1919, she had been accompanied pointedly by Captain Ernest Evans. Evans had already avidly sought the Liberal nomination for the University of Wales constituency in 1918, but had been persuaded to withdraw his name (probably due to pressure from Lloyd George) in favour of veteran Welsh Liberal Sir John Herbert Lewis, a close political associate of the Prime Minister's for fully thirty years. The favour now needed to be repaid.

Evans had already addressed several political meetings in the county during the spring and summer of 1920. On the very day that Vaughan Davies's peerage was announced, Captain Evans arrived at Aberystwyth fresh from 10 Downing Street, and within four short days had already canvassed the electors of the key towns of Aberaeron, Aberystwyth and Tregaron. It was widely felt throughout Cardiganshire that such underhand tactics should not be allowed to go unchallenged. The coalition 'nominee' was certainly not to be granted a 'walk-over'. There was also a growing sentiment that some protest should be made against the increasingly lavish expenditure of the coalition government, and plans to put up an 'anti-waste' candidate were well received within the county boroughs of Aberystwyth, Lampeter and Cardigan.

It was widely felt that the fledgling county Labour Party, set up in December 1918, was not yet sufficiently well established to put up its own parliamentary candidate, but its supporters were strongly attracted by the prospect of an 'anti-waste', 'anti-coalition' aspirant.<sup>16</sup> Some Labourites from the south of the county favoured a socialist candidate, but 'wiser counsels in the Aberystwyth district and the Labour men in the North were loath to spend time and energy on a fight which did not hold out a fair prospect of success'.<sup>17</sup> It was considered that left-wing supporters were likely to vote for an independent Liberal candidate.

As the post-war coalition government ran its course, resentment had grown apace at the apparent betrayal of traditional Liberal principles, now allegedly 'sacrificed to the Moloch of political opportunity'. In some quarters outrage had followed the decision to

make a grant of £1,250,000 from the Treasury to the disestablished Welsh national church. Demands for devolutionary concessions to Wales – even the modest call for a Secretary of State for Wales – were heard no longer, it was argued, because Lloyd George now ‘held and always will hold his great Office on the servile tenure of subjection to Tory domination’.<sup>18</sup>

Speculation soon began to focus on the identity of likely Liberal candidates. Five names were mentioned, two of whom – local Aldermen J. M. Howell and D. C. Roberts – soon withdrew, mainly because they tended to support Lloyd George.<sup>19</sup> Three names remained: Captain Ernest Evans, W. Llewelyn Williams and Sir Lewes Loveden Pryce. Interest and excitement increased throughout the county. There was much uncertainty concerning the political complexion of Cardiganshire as no contested parliamentary election had taken place in the county since January 1910. Women had never previously been able to cast their votes. An independent Liberal candidate was considered ‘essential to the essence of Welsh Liberalism. Otherwise we might as well admit at once that all Welsh seats are at the disposal of the Prime Minister to allocate to whom he will.’<sup>20</sup>

The final selection meeting was to be held at the Victoria Hall, Lampeter on 25 January 1921. By this time Sir Lewes Loveden Pryce had withdrawn his name and local opinion crystallised and polarised sharply behind the two remaining candidates for the nomination. The two highly influential county newspapers – the *Cambrian News* and the *Welsh Gazette* – had very firm political allegiances. The former had come out stoutly in support of Captain Evans from the outset of the pre-election campaign at the beginning of January:

[He] comes to Cardiganshire as a Cardiganshire man knowing the county and its people, understanding its peculiar needs in agriculture and local government – a man reared in its atmosphere and yet broadened by contact with a wider sphere. It is unfair to describe Mr. Evans, as is being done, as ‘the Premier’s nominee’. As a

member of the secretariat at Downing-Street, Mr Evans came into contact and close contact with Mr Lloyd George, but he comes to the electors of Cardiganshire free from any bond, spoken or written. Even his enemies know the Premier too well to accuse him of attempting to curtail the freedom of another man. Mr Evans supports the Coalition and has as much right to that view as Mr Llewelyn Williams has to support Mr Asquith. He has not disguised his ambition to represent his native county in the legislative chamber, and he has made no secret of the fact that when a vacancy arose he would submit himself to the Association for their consideration.<sup>21</sup>

Equally predictably the *Welsh Gazette*, dismissing Evans as ‘an opportunist’ whose ‘sole ambition is not to serve Cardiganshire, but to get a seat in Parliament’, hailed Llewelyn Williams as ‘the man for Cardiganshire ... He is independent and will be free to criticise the wicked waste and extravagance of the Government; free to stand up for the small farmers and free to demand Temperance for Wales.’<sup>22</sup> The ever-spiralling political enthusiasm and partisanship displayed throughout the county was paralleled by intense interest at Westminster, above all at Coalition Liberal headquarters. It was recognised from the outset that Lloyd George could not personally participate in the campaign, but it soon became known that his wife Margaret intended to speak widely on behalf of Captain Evans.

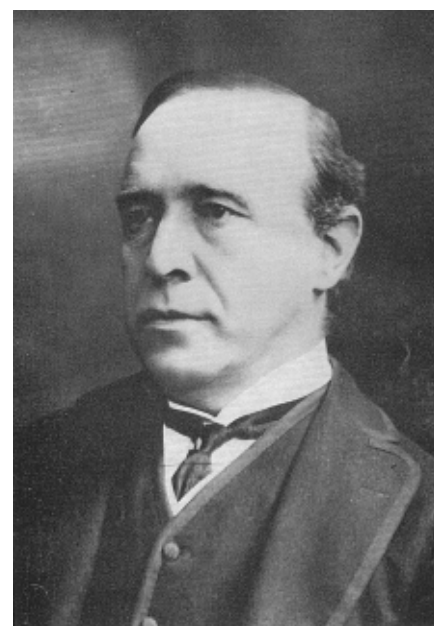
By the standards of the age strict security surrounded the 25 January selection meeting when no fewer than 347 delegates out of a possible 350 attended. In the graphic description of the ‘Special Correspondent’ of *The Times*, ‘The journey to the conference at Lampeter, thirty miles south of Aberystwyth, was reminiscent of a football cup-tie trip. There was the same excitement, the same animated discussion of chances and the same keen partisanship.’<sup>23</sup>

Following a notably turbulent political meeting, where on occasion ‘pandemonium reigned supreme’, in the words of the *Cambrian News* correspondent, Llewelyn Williams polled 216

votes and Captain Ernest Evans 127.<sup>24</sup> On the day of the fateful selection meeting Williams had asserted, ‘I am coming out as a strong “anti-waste” candidate, because of the extravagance of the Government, which has squandered in Mesopotamia hundreds of millions which ought to have been used to build houses in this country’.<sup>25</sup> In response to the voting figures, in an evangelical speech he proclaimed to his followers that Lloyd George had ‘gone astray like a prodigal son’ by abandoning his Liberalism to assume the leadership of a Tory-dominated coalition. In the wake of the selection meeting, the coalitionists convened their own meeting at Lampeter town hall, unanimously selecting Captain Evans as their own candidate. The scene was set for a civil war by-election.

The rival candidates contrasted sharply. W. Llewelyn Williams had been born in Carmarthenshire’s Towy valley in 1867, the son of a tenant farmer, and educated at the celebrated Llandoverly College and Brasenose College, Oxford, where he had made the acquaintance of an array of patriotic Welshmen. He had spent his early career as a journalist and had played an important role in the *Cymru Fydd* (‘Young Wales’) movement of the late nineteenth century when he had formed some rapport with the youthful David Lloyd George. Closely associated with the New Liberal ethos of

#### W. Llewelyn Williams, independent Liberal candidate in the by-election



these years, he had been seriously considered as a possible party candidate for Cardiganshire in place of M. L. Vaughan Davies in 1895.

In January 1897 he had begun a second career when he was called to the bar from Lincoln's Inn. Each time a vacancy arose in a Welsh Liberal seat during subsequent years Williams's name was mentioned as a likely candidate. Eventually, strongly supported by Lloyd George (then the novice President of the Board of Trade), he had entered parliament as MP for the Carmarthen Boroughs in 1906. The two men then became bitter enemies over the conscription bills introduced in 1916, the rift deepened as the war ran its course, and Williams soon found himself politically isolated, refusing offers of non-political posts – 'My soul is not for sale' – and predictably failing to secure the Liberal nomination for a Welsh constituency in 1918.

Williams's relationship with Lloyd George came to the fore during the 1921 by-election campaign which coincided with the establishment of the Welsh Liberal Federation as an Asquithian power base within Wales. Llewelyn Williams (together with Ellis W. Davies, Rhys Hopkin Morris and Judge J. Bryn Roberts) was one of its founders, all of them taking the line that Lloyd George as premier had shamelessly betrayed Welsh interests over temperance, land legislation, administrative devolution and the terms of disendowment.<sup>26</sup> To some extent Williams's appeal tended to be nostalgic in the world of 1921, as his speeches concerned the 'betrayal' of the Welsh over the terms of disendowment, the failure to act over the 'Speaker's Conference' on devolution, and the decision to abandon the 1920 Welsh Licensing Bill. Yet early in the campaign, in a speech at Llandysul, he was at pains to refer to his erstwhile friendship with the Prime Minister:

The Prime Minister was a Welshman – the most noted Welshman ever born, the finest boy he (Mr Williams) had ever come in contact with. Further the Premier was an old friend of his. There never were no two brothers who loved each other so faithfully

than Mr Lloyd George and himself. Whenever either was in trouble they always helped each other. He did not hate Mr. Lloyd George. The most bitter hour in his history was when he had to part from him.

The only thing he had against Captain Ernest Evans was that he was tied to the Coalition. What was the good of sending a Prime Minister's Private Secretary to Parliament? He (Mr Williams) knew something about private secretaries – they dare not call their souls their own. (Laughter)<sup>27</sup>

When he addressed a group of uproarious students at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, Williams faced constant heckling in support of Lloyd George, the candidate disclaiming 'any hostility to the Prime Minister whom, he said, he would be the first to welcome back to the Liberal ranks when he got rid of the Curzons, Carsons, Balfours, and Bonar Laws, who a few years ago tried to cut his throat over the Marconi case'.<sup>28</sup> In his election address he denounced the 'insensate extravagance of the most reckless and improvident Administration that has ever held office in a Democratic country'.<sup>29</sup>

Captain Ernest Evans, born in 1885, was fully eighteen years Williams' junior. Like his rival, he too had been educated at Llandoverly College and had been called to the bar. He was well known in Cardiganshire where his father was clerk to the county council. During the previous few years he had remained at the hub of political life as a member of Lloyd George's 'Garden Suburb' in 10 Downing Street. As already noted, he had hoped to become the Liberal candidate for the University of Wales in 1918.

As the by-election campaign developed it became clear that support for the two candidates was fairly equally matched. At the height of the campaign *The Times*' correspondent wrote, 'In Aberystwyth I was assured this morning that friends who never quarrelled before are at daggers drawn over the present contest ... The fight is between Mr Lloyd George and Welsh Liberalism as represented by Mr. Llewelyn Williams. Every day brings fresh evidence of the bitterness with which the

struggle is being waged.<sup>30</sup> Political pundits were notably reluctant to indulge in prophecy. Quite apart from the uncertainty created by the lack of a parliamentary election in the county for fully eleven years, and the unknown impact of the women's vote for the first time, the physical diversity of Cardiganshire made prediction difficult. Its coastal rim extended fifty miles, and at its widest point inland it ran to fully thirty-five miles. With the exception of the small towns, most of the populace was engaged in agriculture, many residing twelve miles away from the nearest polling station. At the height of the campaign as many as 100 coalition organisers were at work at strategic points in the constituency, desperately anxious to poll every possible vote for Captain Evans. The county electoral register for 1920–21 contained 16,840 men and 14,332 women. Many of the latter were thought to be diehard Lloyd George devotees, but others, alarmed by repeated reports of governmental extravagance and waste, had resolved to cast their votes for Llewelyn Williams. A further consideration was the solid phalanx of between 8,000 and 9,000 true blue Tory supporters in the division, most (but not all) of whom were sure to support Captain Evans.

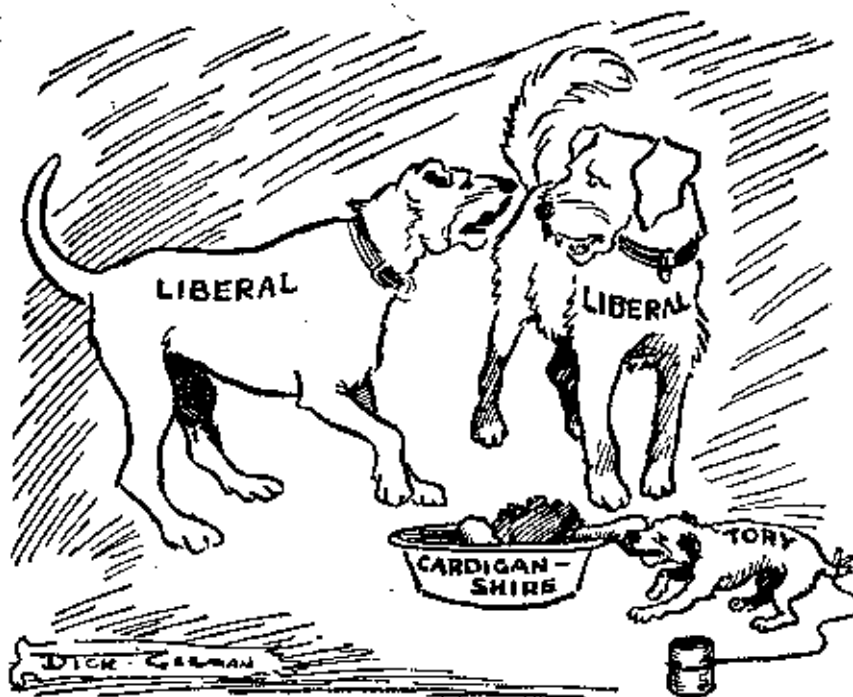
Yet another crucial factor was the religious complexion of the Cardiganshire electorate. It was notable from the beginning of the campaign that the Welsh church question, finally settled the previous year, was an electoral damp squib. At Aberystwyth on 15 February Asquith's daughter Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, who addressed no fewer than eleven campaign meetings, told her audience, 'He [Lloyd George] re-endowed the Church with taxpayers' money', but her impassioned words made little impression.<sup>31</sup> Yet the campaign more generally was coloured by denominational cross-currents; Lloyd George was well known as a Campbellite Baptist, Captain Ernest Evans as a Calvinistic Methodist and Llewelyn Williams as a Congregationalist. The sizeable body of Unitarians within Cardiganshire inclined to Williams. Veteran Liberal Sir John Herbert Lewis, who had addressed

packed meetings at Aberystwyth, Cardigan and Lampeter in support of Captain Evans, recorded in his diary, 'The coast towns are strong for the Coalition, the Upland districts against; Unitarians against, Methodists & Independents said to be against; Baptists & Church for'.<sup>32</sup> Some chapels indeed experienced a deep-rooted split which had long-lasting repercussions. The pastor and elders powerfully supported Lloyd George, while the rank and file of their congregations flocked in droves behind the banner of Llewelyn Williams, who, it was expected, would also win the votes of some 4,000 Labourites in the county.<sup>33</sup>

The acrimony intensified as the campaign ran its course. Many prominent politicians from both sides spoke in the election meetings when messages of support were read out to large, enthusiastic audiences. Strong, impassioned language was employed on both sides. Lady Violet told the county's Wee Free Liberals that they were 'fighting not merely for a man, but for a creed, a faith', urging them to remain true to their 'fathers' sacrifices in 1868'.<sup>34</sup>

Mrs Lloyd George was equally compelling on behalf of the coalition camp. Urged by her husband, 'They are very bitter outside Wales & if we lost, all their speakers & newspapers would say, "Lloyd George spurned & rejected by his own countrymen"', (he then went on, 'I am overwhelmed with great world affairs'),<sup>35</sup> she had spared no effort in support of Captain Evans, addressing no fewer than sixty election meetings. She was at pains to assure the county's farmers that the Prime Minister fully comprehended their difficulties, proclaiming at Cardigan that defeat for the coalition at the by-election would be nothing less than 'stabbing [Lloyd George] in the back'.<sup>36</sup>

Her perorations were a potent fillip to the coalition campaign and undoubtedly helped to woo the new women's vote, sometimes by stressing the drink question. On the eve of the poll Sir J. Herbert Lewis noted in his diary that Margaret Lloyd George 'had addressed about fifteen or twenty meetings, but she looked perfectly fresh & was as placid & serene as usual.



How the press saw the Liberal fight over Cardiganshire

Whatever the result of the election, she will have made an immense contribution to the forces of the Coalition'.<sup>37</sup> Shortly before, *The Times'* Special Correspondent concluded that Mrs Lloyd George had indeed 'exercised a far more potent influence upon the contest than any other individual on either side'.<sup>38</sup>

Although some observers ventured the belief that Llewelyn Williams stood an outside chance of success if he polled solidly in the rural areas, where dissatisfaction with the tenor of coalition politics was highest, and where stories and memories (more especially folk memories) of 1868 remained very much alive, most commentators predicted victory for Captain Evans. Interest was stimulated by the fact that two Liberals were vying for victory in a straight fight without the distraction of a Labour or other candidate. The by-election was also viewed as 'the first organised and sustained attack delivered by the Independent Liberals upon the great political influence wielded by the Prime Minister in Wales. The "Wee Frees" – the "Wee" may soon be inaccurate – are waging in Cardiganshire the strongest fight in which they have engaged since Mr Asquith was returned for Paisley'.<sup>39</sup>

More than 78 per cent of the Cardiganshire electorate, a record high, turned out to vote. Captain Ernest Evans polled 14,111 votes and Llewelyn Williams 10,521. The majority of just over 3,500 votes exceeded expectations somewhat and led exuberant coalition supporters to light beacons on the hill-tops from Aberystwyth to Cardigan.

Lloyd George was positively overjoyed at the outcome. Before the poll he had proclaimed that he would 'rather lose a whole general election than one seat in Wales. The Cardiganshire people are the cutest in the world. It would not do for me to go down there'.<sup>40</sup> Hence his unrestrained exuberance when the result was announced to him at Chequers on 19 February; as Lord Riddell noted in his diary:

19<sup>th</sup> Feb. – To Chequers. Long talk with L. G.. Much excited over the Cardigan election. Result expected every minute when I arrived. Mrs. L. G. has been working like a Trojan in the constituency, delivering 58 speeches in a fortnight. While L. G. and I were walking in the park she came running out breathless to tell him that Evans had won by a majority of 3,590. He was delighted and said that if the result had been the

other way it would have been a serious setback. He warmly embraced Mrs. L. G. bestowing several hearty kisses upon her and telling her that she had won the election ... For some time he spoke of little else but the election.<sup>41</sup>

But in many ways the result was a Pyrrhic victory for the ailing coalition machine. It was clear that Williams had polled more Liberal votes and that Evans's success could be attributed primarily to Tory transport and Tory support. Indeed, as many as 250 coalition vehicles were in evidence in the county on polling day, commandeered from as far afield as Cardiff, Swansea, London, Manchester and Stockport, to convey voters to the sixty scattered polling stations. The Wee Free camp mustered no more than fifty. 'Beaten by Tory votes' was the justifiable catch-phrase of the defeated Asquithians, while Llewelyn Williams himself interpreted the verdict of the poll as 'the first Tory victory since 1874' in Cardiganshire.

On reflection, in response to a message of congratulations, he wrote, 'N.B. (1) We polled 2 to 1 of the Liberals. (2) 9000 Tories (not 6000) polled. (3) The clergy canvassed for L.G. egged on by the Bishop of St. D[avid]. (4) The Calvin[istic Methodist]s were splendidly loyal. Only a few in Aber[ystwyth] voted for Ernest. I got practically all the Noncon[formist] vote *except the Baptists*. (5) L.G. is no longer, even seemingly, the national leader. He is the chief of a faction, mainly Tory.'<sup>42</sup> He evidently interpreted the voting figures as a significant chink in the armour of the coalition government machine.

It was indeed possible to interpret the substantial poll achieved by Williams as firm evidence of dissatisfaction in Wales with the tenor of coalition government. The same sentiments were voiced by *Welsh Gazette* columnist Miss Lilian Winstanley, an Aberystwyth university lecturer and local Liberal organiser, who saw Captain Evans's success as simply 'a temporary victory since it was a *victory for material power over spiritual power*. The coalition had on their side the immense wealth of this Government for profiteers; money was

poured out like water in organising victory; Cardiganshire has never seen such lavishness. A whole fleet of motor cars came on polling day to bring voters to the polling booths, wealthy men's motor cars which they lent because they wished to keep in power the coalition, and the coalition candidate was not likely to do anything to disturb their reign.'<sup>43</sup> Lloyd George had won through, agreed her newspaper, 'but at a terrible loss to his political prestige'.<sup>44</sup>

On all sides it was agreed that some 7,000 Conservative votes had clinched victory for Captain Evans who, when he took his seat in the House of Commons the following week, had Lloyd George as one of his two sponsors, a privilege not bestowed upon a new member since Lady Astor, the first woman MP, in 1919.<sup>45</sup> Within Cardiganshire profound feelings of tension and dissension persisted alongside a conviction that further battles lay ahead. As the president of the county Liberal Association wrote a few days after the by-election, 'The present position of parties even in the Houses of Parliament is undergoing disintegration ... Even in this little town of Cardigan the Tories say and say rightly that they put Capt. Evans in for the County'.<sup>46</sup> In spite of its success in Cardiganshire, the strength of the coalition was ebbing fast. At the beginning of March it lost to Labour in three crucial by-elections – at Dudley, Kirkcaldy and Penistone – and had by then chalked up a net loss of fourteen seats since the coupon general election.

At his speech following the count Llewelyn Williams announced his intention to stand again in Cardiganshire at the next general election. His solid 10,000 votes represented 'the heart and soul of Liberalism' in the county.<sup>47</sup> Rather ironically, however, he was not given the opportunity to contest another election, as he fell victim to double pneumonia and died prematurely at the age of fifty-five on 22 April 1922. During his last days he was preoccupied with thoughts of securing a reconciliation with Lloyd George for whose friendship he still yearned.

In the general election which fol-

lowed the collapse of the coalition government in the autumn Captain Evans was challenged by an independent Liberal, Rhys Hopkin Morris, a barrister from Maesteg in south Wales, and saw his majority slashed to 515 votes. For the coalitionists the writing really was on the wall. When yet another general election ensued in December 1923, Liberal reunion, so flamboyantly trumpeted throughout the country, failed to reach Cardiganshire which was one of only two constituencies nationwide where the Liberal civil war persisted (the other was Camborne in Cornwall). Now the intervention of a Conservative contender in the person of Lord Lisburne proved decisive, dramatically unseating Captain Evans and bringing Morris to Westminster. In 1924 he was returned unopposed, and in fact sat as the county's MP until his appointment as a metropolitan magistrate in 1932. Yet the schism in the ranks of the county's Liberals remained.

The experiences of the years 1921–23 were critical in the history of Cardiganshire Liberalism. The party's traditional ascendancy had been somehow revitalised, underlining a powerful political continuity and creating a homespun dynamism which helped to postpone the local Labour Party's full coming of age – demonstrated by the fact that it did not nominate a parliamentary candidate until the 'doctor's mandate' general election of October 1931 was held swiftly upon the heels of the formation of the so-called National Government. The deep-rooted, enduring cleavage was neatly symbolised by the setting up of two rival Liberal clubs at opposite ends of the main street in Aberystwyth. (Today the Asquithian club remains functional and flourishing; the Lloyd Georgian premises have been converted, perhaps fittingly enough, into an auction room.) When Roderic Bowen became Liberal MP for Cardiganshire in July 1945 he considered that one of his most pressing tasks was to attempt to heal the rift in his followers' ranks which had lasted for a full quarter-century.<sup>48</sup>

In the wake of the 1921 by-election Alderman J. M. Howell, a prominent coalitionist who had refused to allow his name to be considered for the va-

cancy, wrote on reflection:

It was a civil war between group and group.

And more still it was a tug of war between the chief antagonists in London. Left to ourselves, as in all previous elections, we could never have worked up the fire that burned.

It was not an unmixed evil, as some think.

It is a salutary discipline that which compels an individual to choose and to act for himself.

It is good for time; it is good for eternity.

An election oftener than once in ten years is something to be wished for.<sup>49</sup>

His comments were uncommonly prophetic.

The course and outcome of the by-election have a wider significance. The 10,500 votes polled by Llewelyn Williams, a sworn enemy of the prime minister in a predominantly Welsh-speaking, Methodist-dominated constituency in the very heartland of Lloyd George's own personal patrimony, was eloquent testimony to the groundswell of popular feeling against the coalition government. Even within Wales, it seemed, free churchmen, notably the Independents, 'the most political and republican of the sects', were in open rebellion against the government.<sup>50</sup> Were it not for the urban voters, Williams might even have won the day. In industrial constituencies generally, many Anglicans and free churchmen were beginning to voice support for the Labour Party in an attempt to exert their spiritual authority to retain working class men and women within the church. Generally the influence of nonconformists in the press and in by-elections was being eroded by the schism in the ranks of the Liberal Party.

There had been only one Asquithian victory in a by-election during 1920; there were to be none at all during 1921. As the year ran its course, it became increasingly apparent that the Independent Liberals were suffering at the hands of Labour. Penistone in Yorkshire was lost in March 1921. Generally, too, the prospects of the Coalition Liberals looked distinctly gloomy. In March,

Lloyd George was warned by the female organiser of the North Wales Coalition Liberals that 'Ireland is being run for all it's worth against you'.<sup>51</sup>

The Welsh Liberal Council, established in 1921 by Llewelyn Williams and others as an Asquithian powerhouse within Wales, proved something of a damp squib, as it called, rather half-heartedly, for a re-negotiation of the disendowment clauses of the Welsh Church Act, 1920, for further temperance legislation and for the setting up of an elected council for Wales. Demoralised by the result in Cardiganshire in 1921, Watkin Davies (Lloyd George's early biographer) wrote in his diary, 'We must look to England and Scotland to deliver us from autocracy. Poor Wales!'<sup>52</sup> Once again the electoral weakness of Asquithian Liberalism had been underlined. No longer could it pose an effective challenge to the coalition government.

*Dr J. Graham Jones is an assistant archivist of the Welsh Political Archive at the Department of Manuscripts and Records, the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.*

1 *Cambrian News*, 15 February 1921.

2 *Welsh Gazette*, 3 February 1921.

3 The phrase is that used in the National Library of Wales (NLW), Cardiganshire Liberal Association Records, file 56, J. Ellis Jones, hon. secretary of the South Wales Liberal Federation, to Eben Jones, 11 February 1959.

4 On Cardiganshire politics, see Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Cardiganshire Politics: the Liberal ascendancy, 1885-1923', *Ceredigion*, Vol. V, no. 4 (1967), 311-46; and J. Graham Jones, 'Cardiganshire Politics, 1885-1974' in Geraint H. Jenkins and Ieuan Gwynedd Jones (eds.), *Cardiganshire County History, Vol. 3, Cardiganshire in Modern Times* (Cardiff, 1998), pp. 407-29. There is also some material of value in P. J. Madgwick et al (eds.), *The Politics of Rural Wales: a Study of Cardiganshire* (London, 1973).

5 Morgan, *loc. cit.*, p. 328; *Cambrian News*, 19 October 1900.

6 NLW, Cardiganshire Liberal Association Records 144/8, W. Llewelyn Williams to Harry Rees, 14 October 1917 ('Confidential'). On Williams the fullest account is now J. Graham Jones, 'The Journalist as Politician: W. Llewelyn Williams MP (1867-1922)', *Carmarthenshire Antiquary*, Vol. XXXVII (2001), 79-98.

7 NLW, Cardiganshire Liberal Association Records 144/49, Williams to Rees, 12 May 1918.

8 Parliamentary Archive, House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George Papers F/21/2/56, F. E. Guest to D. Lloyd George, 20 July 1918; *Cambrian News*, 29 November 1918.

9 *South Wales Daily News*, 23 November 1918.

10 NLW MS 22,016E, (Cardiganshire Liberal Association Papers), f. 4, Williams to Harry Rees, 27 November 1918 ('Private').

11 NLW, J. M. Howell Papers 28/1, Asquith to Howell, 4 November 1919.

12 *Cambrian News*, 7 January 1921.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Welsh Gazette*, 6 January 1921.

15 NLW, J. M. Howell Papers 27/49, J. Puleston Jones to Howell, 3 February 1921.

16 See Howard C. Jones, 'The Labour Party in Cardiganshire', *Ceredigion*, Vol. IX, no. 2 (1981), 150-61.

17 Cited *ibid.*, p. 154.

18 *Welsh Gazette*, 13 January 1921.

19 NLW MS 22,016E, ff. 7 and 9, telegrams from D. C. Roberts, 7 January 1921, and J. M. Howell, 8 January 1921, to Harry Rees.

20 *Welsh Gazette*, 13 January 1921.

21 *Cambrian News*, 7 January 1921.

22 *Welsh Gazette*, 20 January 1921.

23 *The Times*, 26 January 1921, p. 10, col. e.

24 *Cambrian News*, 28 January 1921.

25 *The Times*, 25 January 1921, p. 12, col. c.

26 *South Wales Daily News*, 10 January 1921.

27 *Cambrian News*, 4 February 1921.

28 *The Times*, 31 January 1921, p. 11, col. d.

29 Election address of W. Llewelyn Williams, February 1921.

30 *The Times*, 11 February 1921, p. 10, col. e.

31 Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, speech at Aberystwyth, 19 February 1921: *ibid.*, 20 February 1921, p. 12, col. b.

32 NLW, Sir John Herbert Lewis Papers B35, diary entry for 18 February 1921.

33 See NLW, E. Morgan Humphreys Papers A2033, T. Gwynn Jones, Aberystwyth, to Humphreys, 26 January 1921.

34 See the *South Wales Daily News*, 16 February 1921.

35 NLW MS 22,823C, ff. 74-75, D. Lloyd George to Margaret Lloyd George, 9 February 1921.

36 *Cardigan and Tivy-Side Advertiser*, 11 February 1921.

37 NLW, Sir John Herbert Lewis Papers B35, diary entry for 18 February 1921.

38 *The Times*, 16 February 1921, p. 11.

39 *Ibid.*

40 Keith Middlemas (ed.), *Thomas Jones Whitehall Diary*, Vol. 1 (Oxford, 1969), pp. 129-30.

41 NLW MS 19,483E, unlabelled press cutting.

42 *Cambrian News*, 25 February 1921; NLW, E. Morgan Humphreys Papers A3712, Williams to Humphreys, 22 February 1921.

43 *Welsh Gazette*, 24 February 1921. The emphasis is mine.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Lady Astor's two sponsors had been D. Lloyd George and former Conservative leader A. J. Balfour.

46 NLW MS 22,016E, f. 17, D. Davies, Cardigan, to Harry Rees, 25 February 1921 (incomplete).

47 *Cambrian News*, 25 February 1921.

48 Notes of an interview with Dr Roderic Bowen, 26 July 1995, very generously placed at my disposal by Dr Mark Egan.

49 *Cambrian News*, 4 March 1921.

50 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: the Lloyd George Coalition Government, 1918-1922*, revised edition (Oxford, 1986), p. 162.

51 Parliamentary Archive, House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George Papers F/96/1/15, Mrs Price White to Mrs Winifred Coombe Tennant.

52 NLW, W. Watkin Davies Papers, diary entry for 19 February 1921.