

A LOST PRIME MINISTER?

- 13 T. E. Ellis to Sir Robert Hudson (May 1892), cited in Neville Masterman, *The Forerunner: the Dilemmas of Tom Ellis, 1859–1899* (Llandybie, 1972), p. 179.
- 14 The phrase is that used in NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 397, Ellis to Daniel, 23 May 1892.
- 15 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 3,222, Acland to Ellis, 17 May 1892.
- 16 NLW MS 23,240E, p. 116, diary entry for 2 April 1892.
- 17 Ibid., diary entry for 8 April 1892.
- 18 See Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics, 1868–1922*, 4th edn. (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 121–22; NLW, Rendel Papers 992, Acland to Rendel, 21 August 1892: 'I have received many kind letters from Wales'.
- 19 John Morley, *The Life of Gladstone* (London, 1908) vol. 3, pp. 494–95.
- 20 See H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1875–1898* (Oxford, 1995), p. 331.
- 21 NLW MS 21,818E, f. 391, Sir John Herbert Lewis to Ivor Davies, 15 September 1933.
- 22 Cited in his obituary in the *Manchester Guardian*, 11 October 1926, p. 6.
- 23 Cited *ibid.*
- 24 Morley, *Recollections*, vol. 1, p. 324.
- 25 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 15.
- 26 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 38, Acland to Ellis, 23 December 1893.
- 27 NLW, A. J. Williams Papers A3/4, Acland to Williams, 28 October 1894.
- 28 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 40, Acland to Ellis, 18 April 1895.
- 29 Ibid. 3,374, John E. Ellis MP, Scarborough, to Ellis, 21 July 1895.
- 30 NLW MS 23,240E, p. 128, diary entry for Christmas 1895. See also NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 3,226, Acland to Ellis, 7 November 1895.
- 31 Ibid. 42, Acland to Ellis, 11 July 1896.
- 32 Ibid. 44, Acland to Ellis, 15 October 1896 ('Confidential').
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 See the analysis in D. A. Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the age of Gladstone and Rosebery: A Study in Leadership and Policy* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 238–39.
- 35 Ibid., pp. 245–46.
- 36 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 45, Acland to Ellis, 2 January 1897.
- 37 Ibid. 48, Acland to Ellis, 15 August 1897.
- 38 NLW, William George Papers 552, D. Lloyd George to William George, 21 January 1898.
- 39 NLW, Sir John Herbert Lewis Papers A1/100, Frank Edwards, Bath, to Lewis, 11 July 1898.
- 40 NLW, T. E. Ellis Papers 52, Acland to Ellis, 12 June 1898 ('Private').
- 41 Ibid. 53, Acland to Ellis, 14 August 1898.
- 42 National Library of Scotland, Rosebery Papers, box 76, Acland to Rosebery, undated [?1901].
- 43 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 614, Acland to Daniel, 19 August 1902.
- 44 A. H. D. Acland, *Sir Thomas Dyke-Acland: a Memoir and Letters* (Scarborough, 1902).
- 45 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 615, Acland to Daniel, 15 January 1903.
- 46 F. E. Hamer (ed.), *The Personal Papers of Lord Rendel* (London, 1931), p. 286.
- 47 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 623, Acland to Daniel, 13 March 1905.
- 48 Acland to Campbell-Bannerman, 30 November 1905, cited in John Wilson, *C.B.: a Life of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman* (London, 1973), p. 439. Reflecting on his retirement from parliament seven years earlier, he commented, 'I overstrained my brain when I was about five and twenty ... & there's not much left now'.
- 49 NLW, D. R. Daniel Papers 616, Acland to Daniel, 29 December 1905 ('Private').
- 50 NLW, William George Papers 3,402, D. Lloyd George to Richard Lloyd, 15 June 1906.
- 51 NLW MS 20,463C, no. 2,393, Acland to D. Lloyd George, 16 September 1909 ('Confidential').
- 52 NLW MS 22,522C, f. 165, Acland to D. Lloyd George, 7 August 1910 ('Private').
- 53 See Ian Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land: the Land Issue and Party Politics in England, 1906–1914* (London, 2001), p. 84.
- 54 Parliamentary Archive, House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George Papers C/2/1/6, C. Roden Buxton to D. Lloyd George, 11 August 1912.
- 55 NLW, George M. Ll. Davies Papers 3,220, Acland to Davies, 17 February 1925 ('Private').
- 56 *The Times*, 11 October 1926, p. 21, col. c.
- 57 Ibid., 13 October 1926, p. 7, col. e.

REPORT

Clement Davies – Liberal Party saviour?

Fringe meeting report, September 2003, Brighton, with Alun Wyburn-Powell, Dr David Roberts and Roger Williams MP.

Report by **Graham Lippiatt**

When I joined the Liberal Party in 1972, Clement Davies was already a largely forgotten man to the vast majority of party members. Yet this was only ten years after his death and just sixteen since he had led the party – the equivalent to looking back today to the run-up to Paddy Ashdown's leadership of the merged Liberal Democrats. It was as if the contemporary Liberal Party had been born again in the Grimond years, and what had gone before was consigned to dust and irrelevance.

If one of the purposes of the Liberal Democrat History Group is to help make visible aspects and personalities of Liberal history that were previously ignored or marginalised, then the re-emergence of interest in Clement Davies is a particular achievement. In recent years Davies has been rediscovered and rehabilitated. It has been shown that the seeds of the Liberal Party's revival, brought to full bloom under Jo Grimond, were firmly planted in the Davies era. In addition, interest in Davies' other achievements, his

role in helping to bring down the Chamberlain government in May 1940 and the replacement of Chamberlain as Prime Minister by Churchill, and his refusal of Churchill's offer of a place in government in 1951, thereby preventing a terminal split in the Liberal Party, have been explored in a series of articles in the *Journal of Liberal History*.

Last year saw the publication of the first biography of Clement Davies.¹ Before this book the main source of information about Davies was an unpublished MA thesis,² and it was to hear the authors of these two publications talking on the subject of Davies as Liberal Party saviour that we gathered in Brighton for the History Group fringe meeting, chaired by Roger Williams, MP for Brecon & Radnorshire.

Alun Wyburn-Powell spoke principally about Davies' leadership of the party, placed in the context of his earlier career. He started by reminding us that Davies was the forgotten leader. There is little tangible evidence of his importance. On his birth place in mid-Wales there is a home-made plaque, but one which contains slightly inaccurate information; and while there were, of course, still people who remembered him, their recollection was likely to be of an old and old-fashioned man, genial and slightly unwell, who talked a great deal. The bald historical record will show that under Davies' leadership Liberal parliamentary representation fell from twelve to six, and on that basis his leadership might not be judged very exciting. He wrote no diary or memoirs and did not even leave a will. While he was offered ministerial posts, he turned them down, so no government archives exist for historians, although his personal papers are available to researchers in the National Library of Wales.

Davies was born in rural Wales and educated locally before attending Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he got a first-class degree in law. He then

went on to become one of the most successful lawyers and businessmen of his generation, culminating in his being managing director of Unilever for eleven years. Politics was not his first love and, indeed, he was a reluctant participant. Lloyd George first asked Clement Davies to stand for Parliament in 1910 but it was not until the 1929 general election, aged forty-six, that he agreed to do so and was elected for Montgomeryshire.

Even after he became an MP, he was soon disillusioned with politics and looked to business rather than Parliament for career advancement. Despite good work in the House of Commons on the Coal Mines Bill, Davies felt the party and its leadership had gone back on its pledges on this piece of legislation, so when the opportunity arose to join the board of Unilever, at an annual salary of £10,000, he decided to take it. The board insisted that this was not a post which was compatible with Davies' being an MP, so he decided he would not contest the next election and Montgomeryshire Liberals began looking for another candidate. As it turned out, Unilever did allow him to stay on as an MP, but he was never truly settled as a Liberal over the coming years, seriously considering resignation in 1935, first joining then leaving the Liberal Nationals, and sitting at one time purely as an Independent.

Wyburn-Powell characterised Davies' years as an MP up to 1945 as those of a 'brilliant loose cannon' but then turned to the period of his leadership of the party, when 'greatness [was] thrust upon him'. Following the defeat at the 1945 election of the Liberal leader Sir Archie Sinclair, together with other leading figures such as Beveridge and Percy Harris, the party was down to twelve, fairly disparate, MPs with no obvious or uncontroversial candidate to take over from Sinclair. Although Sinclair was out, there was good reason to believe he might be returned

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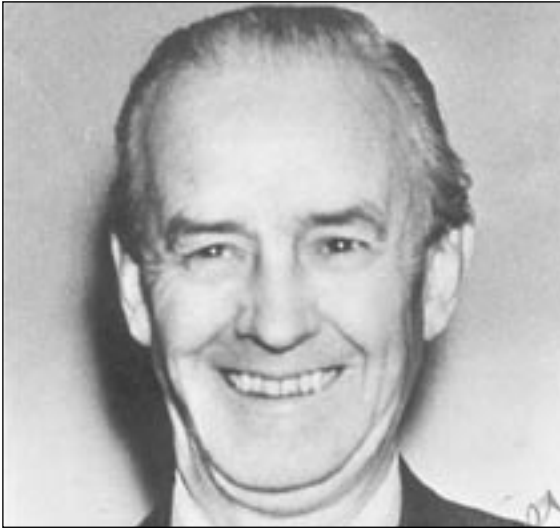
at a by-election³ or at the next general election, so the Liberals were only thinking in terms of a stopgap leader when they elected Davies, not only the oldest of their number but one who had only returned to the party during the war.

According to Wyburn-Powell the Liberal MPs returned in 1945 were mostly either on the distinct right or the distinct left of the party, making a compromise candidate difficult to identify. And once he was leader, Davies was obliged to try and balance these opposing forces, including MPs such as Gwilym Lloyd-George, who was nine-tenths of the way to the Conservatives, and Tom Horabin who was similarly Labour-bound. As well as the four MPs new to the Commons, Davies had to manage individuals such as the academic Professor Gruffydd, the MP for the University of Wales, whose seat was soon to be abolished, and the charismatic and dynamic Megan Lloyd George.

In addition to his political problems, Davies also faced almost intolerable personal tragedy. Of his four children, three died in separate incidents, each at the age of twenty-four. On top of this, it is now clear that he had an alcohol problem. He was highly stressed and found it hard to relax, so turned to serious drinking at times of crisis and occasionally had to spend time in hospital as a result.

Wyburn-Powell told us that Davies' eleven-year leadership of the party could be divided into four phases: a roller-coaster ride with great highs and dips. In the first phase, the early years of the Attlee government, the Liberal Party took a broadly left-wing stance, generally supportive of the government, and relations inside the party were in the main harmonious, with Davies enjoying a honeymoon and the party anticipating the possible return to Parliament of Archie Sinclair. However, between 1948 and 1951, the second phase of Davies' leadership, a series of things

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**Clement Davies:
pre-war and post-war**

went wrong. With the approach of the 1950 general election, debate in the party about whether to fight on a broad or narrow front began to intensify. The left–right divide also re-emerged around a debate over electoral pacts, mainly with the Conservatives. At this time, too, Davies and his wife Jano were both quite seriously ill, leading to speculation that a new leader might be needed.

The outcome of the 1950 election could be read as relatively comforting for the Liberals in terms of vote share per candidate, with an overall share about the same as that in 1945 and with nine MPs elected. But a blow for Davies was the loss of Frank Byers, his Chief Whip (and a potential successor as leader) who went down to defeat in Dorset North. In the approach to the next election,

which followed very quickly in October 1951, the Liberals were in very poor shape organisationally and politically. At this contest only 109 candidates were put up, their vote collapsed to 2.5 per cent, and the party fell to six MPs. Perversely this brought some respite for Davies as three of his biggest problems, Megan Lloyd George, Emrys Roberts and Edgar Granville, all lost their seats, leaving a smaller but more cohesive parliamentary grouping. This inaugurated the third phase of Davies' leadership, from 1951 until 1955.

Immediately after the general election, Churchill, back as Prime Minister, offered Clement Davies a coalition with the Conservatives, a Cabinet seat for Davies himself and a couple of junior ministries for other Liberals. Davies was highly tempted by this. He knew he would never get another chance of office. Appreciating the implications for party unity, however, and after consulting with colleagues, he turned the offer down.

Then followed a period first of consolidation and, later, revival. Wyburn–Powell identified 1953 as the true low point of Liberal Party fortunes, exactly fifty years before the Brent East by–election triumph. From 1954 onwards, the Liberal vote in parliamentary by–elections began to improve, including good results (although not victories) in Inverness, Torquay and Hereford.⁴ The general election of 1955 was the first since 1929 at which the Liberals did not suffer a net loss of seats and the overall vote share improved, if only slightly. Davies himself, however, was now approaching seventy years old and his health was indifferent. The final phase of his leadership was therefore from 1955 to 1956 when, in Wyburn–Powell's analysis, he was something of a lame duck. With the party waiting for Grimond, and reluctantly acknowledging his position, Davies stood down at the 1956 party assembly. He remained the MP for Montgomeryshire for the

rest of his life, dying in 1962, just a few days after the Orpington by–election victory.

In summing up Davies' leadership, Wyburn–Powell believed, strangely, that he had been a weak leader yet effective, with a style that was benign and emollient, if rather vague. He had held the party together, keeping it in business and alive. He made a personal sacrifice in rejecting Churchill's offer of coalition and a Cabinet seat. Had he accepted that offer, the party would surely have fractured and would probably have destroyed itself. In that sense, Wyburn–Powell concluded, Clement Davies had been the saviour of the Liberal Party. Intriguingly, Wyburn–Powell entered a caveat to this proposition. If Davies had accepted the Cabinet post, Wyburn–Powell thought it conceivable, though a very slim chance, that the party might have survived, led by Grimond, outside any coalition. He did not explore this idea but the thought runs counter to the now accepted view, endorsed by Wyburn–Powell in his talk and his book, as well as by others, that Davies saved the Liberals from extinction by turning down the arrangement offered by Churchill.

The next speaker was Dr David Roberts, the Registrar of University College, Bangor. Roberts had been granted access to the papers of Clement Davies by the family while a research student at Aberystwyth in the 1970s and stumbled on a fascinating, important and neglected history while working on them. He was intrigued by Davies, the reluctant politician: someone whose first love was really the law and who could have attained high legal office. He was interested, too, by Davies' eccentric political journey and his individual approach to party. Davies was a Lloyd Georgite in the 1920s and remained close to him even during the Second World War when he actually sat for a time as an Independent. He also

took the Liberal National whip for a while and later described himself as Liberal and Radical.

Roberts was also attracted to Davies' campaigns against poverty and depopulation in rural Wales. Whereas much was known in the 1930s about the social and economic problems of the Welsh industrial areas such as the South Wales coalfields, less attention was paid to the countryside. Montgomeryshire was the only county in England and Wales which had a lower population in the 1930s than it had had in 1801. Davies campaigned on rural issues with a force which struck a chord even with non-Liberals such as the Labour MP Jim Griffiths, who was to become the first Secretary of State for Wales. Roberts believed that Davies' chairmanship in 1938 of a Committee of Inquiry into the Anti-Tuberculosis Service in Wales and Monmouthshire, and the eventual outcome of the committee's work, was a major achievement. The remit of the inquiry allowed Davies to report on a wide area of social and economic deprivation and the impact of the inquiry would have been much greater if war had not broken out soon after.

For Roberts, however, the most fascinating aspect of researching Davies' political career was the discovery of the central role he played in bringing down the government of Neville Chamberlain in May 1940 and the installation of Winston Churchill as Prime Minister – a critical episode in British political history. Here was a stark contrast with what was actually remembered about Davies, the unwilling and slightly eccentric party politician, a man with legal and business ambitions rather than political ones, concerned mainly with local or Welsh issues, who presided over the Liberal Party when it appeared to be heading for oblivion. How could historians have missed the real story?

Roberts outlined the components of Davies' role in the replacement of Chamberlain by

Churchill. First, although Davies had been a supporter of the government in the 1930s as a Liberal National, after 1939 he became a critic of government policy and action in the prosecution of the war. He became chairman, in 1939, of an all-party group of parliamentarians called the Vigilantes, opposed to Chamberlain's handling of the war. When it was founded, in September 1939, there were about twenty members of this group, with the dissident Tory MP Robert Boothby as its secretary, and its membership grew to about sixty by the spring of 1940.

Opposition to Chamberlain reached its peak in May 1940, after the humiliating withdrawal of British troops from Norway. Even as late as 2 May, Conservative MPs had received Chamberlain cordially in the House of Commons, but, by 10 May, he was out, replaced by Churchill. Davies' role was to work behind the scenes during the crucial two-day debate on 7 and 8 May to persuade enough MPs to abstain or vote against the Government and to maximise the impact of anti-government speeches. He also encouraged key individuals to take part in the debate, in particular persuading Lloyd George to make what turned out to be a vital and devastating intervention. Davies also ensured a large audience of MPs were present in the chamber to hear the Tory MP Leo Amery make a powerful and telling assault on the Prime Minister. At the vote the Government's majority, nominally over 200, was reduced to 81.

Davies was the one person who was in touch with all the different opponents of Neville Chamberlain. He now switched his approach and began applying pressure to the Labour leadership, Attlee and Greenwood, with whom he was on good terms, not to join a coalition government led by Chamberlain. He also lobbied hard for Churchill to become Prime Minister – something, as Roberts

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pointed out, which was by no means as inevitable as it seems today. He worked particularly hard to overcome the emerging consensus that Lord Halifax should succeed Chamberlain.

Among the political elite it was well known that Davies had been the chief protagonist in the coup to topple Chamberlain; many, including Amery, Jowitt, Boothby and Beaverbrook, acknowledged and recorded this in letters, diaries or the press. Odd, then, that it has taken historians around sixty years fully to catch up.

A lively question and answer and discussion followed around aspects of Davies' contribution to political and Liberal history, his oratorical ability, his internationalism, his wide experience of foreign travel, his proto-Europeanism, his support for devolution and racial and sexual equality, and above all his determination to show that the Liberal Party he led was a key component of a modern and flourishing band of international Liberal organisations, not simply the dying and irrelevant remnant of its Victorian and Edwardian glories.

Graham Lippiatt is Secretary of the Liberal Democrat History Group. Alun Wyburn-Powell's Clement Davies: Liberal Leader is reviewed later in this Journal (see page 39).

- 1 Alun Wyburn-Powell, *Clement Davies, Liberal Leader* (Politico's Publishing, 2003).
- 2 David Roberts, 'Clement Davies and the Liberal Party, 1929–1956', MA thesis (University of Wales, 1975).
- 3 The successful Tory candidate who beat Sinclair in Caithness & Sutherland, E. L. Gandar Dower, had promised to stand down once the war against Japan was won. In the event he reneged on this commitment.
- 4 This point was reinforced from the floor by Michael Steed who indicated that local election results showed a similar upward trend for the Liberals from a low point in 1951–53, the revival clearly starting during the last years of Davies' leadership and providing a legacy for further significant progress under Grimond.