

Biography

John Davies examines the life of Ivor Davies (1915–1986), who would have been the Liberal candidate at the Oxford by-election in 1938.

Keeper of the Liberal Flame

In the late 1930s, Ivor Davies was one of the brightest of the Liberal Party's rising young stars. For the leadership of the Union of University Liberal Students and for the candidacy in Central Aberdeenshire he was preferred respectively to Frank Byers and Jo Grimond, who became two of the most noted Liberals of that generation. He was three times elected President of his university Liberal Club and a profile in the student magazine concluded that 'he has many of the potentialities of a great man'.¹ He was certainly seen as a coming man in the Liberal Party and constituencies were almost queuing up for the services of this eloquent and personable young Liberal. He turned down a far from unpromising candidacy in Bewdley.² His celebrity within the party was such that it came as no surprise when he was chosen to fight a by-election of the highest profile in Oxford at the time of the Munich Crisis.

Davies came from the Celtic, nonconformist tradition of many of the Liberal activists of that period. His political beliefs were in the main radical and to the left of the Liberal Party of the day. His election addresses³ frequently led on world peace and support for the United Nations. He supported unilateral nuclear disarmament and opposed conscription and German rearmament. He was an ardent free trader and advocate of separate Parliaments for Scotland and Wales. He pressed continually for the full implementation of the Beveridge Report, for affordable housing for those on low incomes and for Keynesian programmes of public works. He was very strongly anti-racist. His agenda included profit sharing and partial nationalisation. He wished to reduce indirect taxation and reform purchase tax, leasehold obligations and industrial rates of taxation. He was opposed to comprehensive schools and farm subsidies.

It was Davies' misfortune that the years of his political prime coincided with the bleakest period of the Liberal Party's electoral fortunes, culminating, after the 1956 Carmarthen by-election, in its reduction to five Members of Parliament with the majority of those dependent to an extent on the formal or informal agreement of the Conservatives not to field a candidate. Consequently he was never afforded the opportunity to serve in Parliament, which many thought to be his due. Drawing words from the old hymn, *One Church, One Faith, One Lord*, he was in the habit of referring to himself and his small band of supporters as 'the faithful few'. The present Liberal Party has every reason to be grateful to these few who kept the flame burning in its darkest days and maintained and developed bases from which it was possible to elect Liberal Members of Parliament in happier times for the party.

Ivor Davies was born in Pontrhydygroes, Cardiganshire, on 12 August 1915. He was the second son of Roderick Glyn Davies, a noted Minister of the Congregationalist Church⁴ and Elizabeth Florence, neé Morgan, daughter of the local doctor. In those days, this area of Wales was undisputed Liberal territory and Ivor became a convinced and passionate Liberal in the radical Welsh tradition. His political hero was David Lloyd George, with whom his family was acquainted. Throughout his whole life, his home was full of books, pictures and memorabilia connected with the great Welsh statesman.

His father's ministries took him first to Kent and then to Shepherd's Bush and to Acton in London, where Ivor received his early education. The family then moved to Morningside in Edinburgh and Ivor completed his education at George Watson's College and Edinburgh University.

While at University he edited the undergraduate magazine *The Student* and quickly gained a reputation

as an outstanding debater in the Liberal cause. He was elected President of the Union of University Liberal Societies. On leaving university, he worked as a journalist on the *Liberal News Chronicle*. His writings for this and for other newspapers and magazines⁵ added to his standing within the party and he was soon adopted as Liberal candidate for Central Aberdeenshire.

In October 1938, a by-election occurred in Oxford as a result of the death of the sitting Conservative member, and Ivor Davies was chosen by the local Liberal Association to fight the seat. The Conservative candidate was Quintin Hogg and the Labour candidate Patrick Gordon-Walker, both later Cabinet Ministers for their respective parties.— The Munich Agreement had been signed at the end of September and the issue of appeasement dominated the campaign.⁶ This was the first and most famous in a series of by-elections in which a Popular Front was formed against the Government's foreign policy.

The Labour Party opposed any co-operation with the Liberal Party, but the Liberal Party Executive passed a resolution in October 1938 declaring that 'because of the present emergency it is ready to subordinate party considerations and to cooperate wholeheartedly with men and women of all parties, who realise the gravity of the time.' Davies entered the campaign against the wishes of the Liberal Party leadership, and received no support from the national party organisation.

According to Davies's own account:⁷

The contest had not been in progress long before it became quite clear that the Liberals were succeeding beyond their most sanguine expectations. The prospect of success was small but the Labour candidate seemed destined to be a bad third. In view of the international situation, Davies offered early in the contest to withdraw, if Gordon-Walker would do the same, to allow an independent anti-Munich candidate to go forward. The offer was treated with scorn, but as the pattern became plain, the local Socialists in their alarm reconsidered the position quickly. Their leaders ... Frank Pakenham and R.H.S. Crossman ...

made representations to Labour Party Headquarters and were met with a blank refusal. It was not until Transport House agents came into the Division and saw the exact position that some progress was made. Mr Gordon-Walker was most reluctant to withdraw, but three days before nomination day he agreed to do so and a move was promoted to persuade Mr A.D. Lindsay, the Master of Balliol, to go forward.

He required little persuasion; few candidates can have manifested a greater enthusiasm to be adopted. By this time the local Liberal Association, and even their candidate, were disappointed that their sound work was to be in vain and took some persuading to withdraw from the fight. After an emotional and fervid meeting, their correct course of action became plain

and Davies stood aside and handed over his organisation to Lindsay ... The election itself came as something of an anti-climax after the historic preliminaries. Hogg was a first-rate candidate and made rings round Lindsay, whose classroom style and uninspiring delivery were ill-fitted for the hustings ... An unusual feature of the contest was that a number of prominent Liberals, who had declared their inability to speak for their own candidate, found it convenient to visit Oxford to support Lindsay.

Ivor Davies said that during the negotiations he formed a high opinion of Pakenham's integrity and a poor opinion of his ability, and vice versa for Crossman.


One of the arguments put forward for adopting Lindsay as candidate was that 'everyone knew him'. Because he was a

OXFORD CITY BY-ELECTION

IVOR DAVIES
THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE

Says:—

I believe in—



- (1) **PEACE** through co-operation between the peoples. Maintaining that a lasting Peace can only come through the removal of economic barriers.
- (2) **CHEAP FOOD FOR THE PEOPLE**, being a strenuous opponent of the present policy of the Government in taxing the necessities of life.
- (3) **ABOLITION OF UNEMPLOYMENT**. By a short term policy of necessary Public Works such as Roads, Bridges, Drainage, and Afforestation.
- (4) **PENSIONS**. Increases for Old Age Pensioners to meet rising cost of living, and Pensions for Spinsters.
- (5) **OWNERSHIP FOR ALL**. As a solution to the present unequal distribution of wealth.
- (6) **INDUSTRY**. A maximum 48-hour week and a holiday with pay for all workers in all industries.
- (7) **HOUSING**. An increase in the amount spent by the State in providing small houses at low rents.

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great figure in the university, his donnish supporters assumed that everyone in the town would know him as well. They did not. Over half the electorate had no idea who he was. There was great interest in the by-election among undergraduates, many of whom did not have a vote, and a fair amount of apathy among townspeople, who had. The Popular Front candidate and some of his supporters were, however, unwilling to campaign in a way that would win the popular vote. The street slogan was 'Oxford Wants Lindsay. Hitler wants Hogg', but, campaigning in the city, Lindsay palpably lacked the common touch. As a distinguished philosophy don and Lindsay supporter put it: 'If he can't win on his own merits, without being vulgar, better to lose'.⁸ Hogg was elected by just under 3,500 votes.

Ivor Davies had always been a strong advocate of the League of Nations and an opponent of fascism and had been involved in some fierce demonstrations against Sir Oswald Mosley. When the Second World War was declared, he enlisted in the Royal Air Force on the first day and rose through the ranks to become Flying Officer, acting Flight Lieutenant. He served in Burma and was wounded in the drive for Rangoon. In 1940 he married Jean McLeod, who had been a fellow student at Edinburgh, in his father's church. They had three children who followed them in their interest in politics. His daughter Mary, prior to her tragic early death in 1982, had followed her father as President of Edinburgh University Liberal Club and had been elected a Liberal councillor in the London Borough of Havering. His son John was Parliamentary candidate for Labour against Mrs Thatcher in Finchley in 1987 and councillor and Group Leader in the London Borough of Barnet.

Both Ivor and his wife were opponents of the party truce that prevailed during the war. Jean acted as agent to the journalist Honor Balfour in the celebrated Darwen by-election of 1943 when, standing as an Independent Liberal, she came within seventy votes of defeating the National Government candidate.⁹

At the end of the war, Ivor returned to fight Central Aberdeenshire. With

John Junor, later editor of the *Sunday Express*, who was fighting the neighbouring constituency, he toured the Highlands and Islands speaking for the Liberal cause. The Scottish Labour Party was interested in attracting his political talents to their ranks, and it was suggested that he might be offered the safe seat of Dunfermline Burghs, but Ivor was a resolute Liberal and spurned these advances.

In the streets of Central Aberdeenshire, local schoolchildren who supported the Liberals sang this rhyme about the three candidates:

Vote for Spence
And you'll get no pence.
Vote for Hay
And you'll get no pay.
Vote for Ivor
And you'll get a fiver.

— not to be taken literally, of course! In what proved to be a poor general election for the Liberals, Ivor finished strongly in third place, very close behind the Labour candidate.¹⁰

Following the 1945 election, his interest in international affairs and world peace led to him taking the post of Regional Officer for the United Nations Association in the North East of England. He returned to Scotland in 1950 to contest what was now West Aberdeenshire. He increased his vote but again just failed to overtake the Labour candidate. He had, however, established the strong base that contributed to Liberal electoral victories later in the century.

In 1950, he moved his family to Oxford to work in partnership with Donald McIntosh Johnson,¹¹ an old friend from the days of the wartime party truce, who had come very close to winning Chippenham in 1943 as an Independent Liberal but later became Conservative MP for Carlisle. It was reported that at one time Johnson and Davies had devised a scheme whereby they would divide the country in two and each fight all by-elections in their respective halves. Ivor Davies never allowed politics to interfere with friendship and he retained strong and lasting links with those like Johnson and Honor Balfour who left the Liberal Party. In fact, he supported Johnson in the particular campaigns he pursued in Parliament on such issues as



Ivor Davies in 1955

mental health, drug abuse, aid to travellers and the winding up of the National Liberals. Johnson had an eccentric streak and at one time mounted furious opposition to the dangers he saw in the introduction of winking indicators on cars, insisting that arm-operated indicators should continue. The situation that we would now face on modern motorways had he prevailed can barely be imagined.

Johnson owned the Marlborough Arms Hotel in Woodstock but later concentrated his energies on his small publishing firm Christopher Johnson (later Johnson Publications). Ivor was his co-director and in 1950 published his own book, *Trial by Ballot*, a political history of the years 1918 to 1945, regarded by academics as one of the best accounts of the period.¹² He was also heavily involved in writing and editing the best-selling *I was Churchill's Shadow* by Detective Chief Inspector W. H. Thompson, who had guarded Churchill during the war. He later moved to become Chairman and Managing Director of the book distribution company Trade Counter which expanded and prospered under his leadership. He served for many years on the Distribution and Methods Committee of the Publishers Association and was Secretary of the Independent Publishers Guild.¹³ Both his sons also worked in publishing. John was a Director of the Publishers Association for twenty-four years. His second son, Michael, worked initially with his father at Trade Counter, was a co-founder of Wordsworth Editions

and later established his own book business in Ware, Hertfordshire.

Back in Oxford, Davies quickly threw himself into local Liberal politics and was selected as parliamentary candidate for the 1955 election.¹⁴ The Liberals had not contested Oxford in 1951, and he lost his deposit, polling just above 5000 votes. He fought the seat again in 1959 and in 1964 and by then had raised the Liberal vote to a creditable 8797.¹⁵

Ivor Davies first stood for Oxford City Council in 1953 in the East Ward¹⁶ where he finished bottom of the poll. For many years thereafter there was no set of council elections at which he was not a candidate. After several efforts in the North Ward, he concentrated on his home ward of Summertown & Wolvercote. He was diligent and conscientious on local issues,¹⁷ from the building of motorways to the removal of the infamous Cutteslowe Wall and built up a considerable local following. At that time, the Labour Party rarely contested the seat. In 1962, aided by a swing to the Liberals in the wake of the remarkable Orpington by-election victory, he gained the Summertown & Wolvercote seat on Oxford City Council, being among the first Liberals to serve on that council for many years. He became Vice-Chairman of the Libraries Committee. He lost the seat in 1965. Here, as ever, politics did not impede friendship. He built strong and enduring relationships with the Oxford builder and Conservative councillor, Harry Bowdery, the Chief Clerk of the Council, Gilbert Phipps, and the left-wing Labour councillors Olive and Edmund Gibbs. In her autobiography,¹⁸ Olive Gibbs, twice Lord Mayor of Oxford, Chair of Oxfordshire County Council and of the national CND, praised his 'life-long political and personal integrity' and described Ivor and Jean as 'close personal friends'. Ivor Davies's last redoubtable campaign for election to what was then Oxfordshire County Council was in the North Ward in 1982, at the age of sixty-six.

He remained on the radical side of Liberalism. At the Liberal Party Assembly in Edinburgh in 1961, he led a revolt against the platform on the recognition of East Berlin and was elected to the Liberal Party Council. Although he became a hero to many of the rank and

file, this action did not endear him to the party hierarchy. He was also scathingly attacked in the press by Bernard Levin, who described him as 'the star-eyed idiot from Oxford'.¹⁹ Nonetheless, his contribution to the Party Council and committees was sufficiently valued for him to be seen as one of the front figures in the 1964 general election campaign.²⁰

He chaired the Oxford Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. He developed strong links with the University Liberal Club, particularly when his son John was at Christ Church, and was appointed honorary Vice-President. Good friends and supporters in Oxford included Lord and Lady Beveridge, Lord and Lady Franks and Bob Hawke, later Labour Prime Minister of Australia.

The links with the University Liberal Club proved his undoing. A group of dons, led by Max Beloff, pressed for one of their number to be the Parliamentary candidate and Ivor was not re-selected for the 1966 election. He was deeply disappointed by this decision. Those who voted against him claimed he was 'too old and past it'. The reference to his age was unfair, for he was still some months short of fifty, but clearly, after four candidatures, there was pressure from some quarters for a change. In essence, this was a contest between Town and Gown of the type for which Oxford is renowned. Although university-educated, Davies associated himself much more with the people of the city than the dons in the colleges. Beloff was right wing in his views, hated CND and later became an ardent Thatcherite and Conservative life peer. Davies' hero in an Oxford context was the populist former Liberal MP Frank Gray. The conflict may be summed up in the response of the outspoken Ted Rosser, former Morris car worker and successful Oxford businessman, who stood in tandem with Ivor Davies on many occasions, to Beloff after the selection: 'They may call you Beloff, but all I say is bugger off'. Rosser and the other regulars of the City Liberal Association showed their appreciation of Ivor Davies' services by making him their President, a post from which he continued to enthuse the Liberal cause for many years.

With his wife Jean, he also built upon his interests in the Oxford community, chairing the North Oxford Grove House Club and the Victim Support Group. Jean was a magistrate in Oxford for fifteen years and a founder of Norreys House, a residential home for young women. Ivor adhered firmly to the Christian faith of his father and was a deacon and secretary of Summertown United Reform Church. In 1984, the Liberal leader, David Steel, nominated Ivor for the award of the CBE²¹ for political and public service. He died two years later and is buried in the family grave at Strata Florida, Cardiganshire, with his wife Jean, who died eighteen months afterwards.

Ivor and Jean Davies gave a great deal to the people of Oxford, who showed their recognition by packing into the church in Summertown for their funerals. At Ivor's, the Minister, Donald Norwood, told the congregation 'how proud we have all been of our Ivor'. *Cwm Rhondda* was sung and the parting blessing was given in Welsh. At Jean's funeral, Olive Gibbs read the lesson and Honor Balfour gave the valedictory address, in which she spoke movingly of the bright young woman who had come with her to Darwen and served so valiantly in the momentous by-election forty-five years before. Tributes flowed in the local press.²²

Ivor Davies was an able and eloquent man, both on the political platform and in the pulpit, where he was a tireless lay preacher. His was a fine life, guided by the deepest Liberal principles. He would have loved to have been a Liberal Member of Parliament and often said with complete sincerity and honesty that he would literally have given his right arm for six months in the House of Commons in the Liberal cause. He would have been delighted to have lived to see the outcome of the 1997 and 2001 general elections and to see the results of all his hard work in his old stamping grounds come to fruition, when the constituencies of Oxford West & Abingdon and Gordon in Aberdeenshire both returned Liberal Democrat MPs.

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peace when the war turned against Britain in the spring of 1940. It must, of course, be admitted that such a narrative would be difficult to construct, for in the years after the end of his premiership in 1922 Lloyd George's attention was understandably directed away from international affairs and towards the domestic problems of the British economy and the Liberal Party. That said, Lentin shows that Lloyd George was in no sense Hitler's dupe. All the same, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that he misjudged his man. There were aspects of Hitler to which Lloyd George was instinctively drawn, not least because Hitler was enacting in Germany some of the social and economic policies which the Welshman had unsuccessfully urged upon the National Government in Britain.

But to suggest that, had Lloyd George rather than Neville Chamberlain been in power in the late 1930s, some sort of Anglo-German understanding would have been arrived at, presupposes that Britain could, in anything other than the very short term, have lived in harmony with a Nazi Germany rampant and unrestrained in continental Europe.

There is plenty here to stimulate the reader, though at the end of the day he may still decide that Lloyd George will forever escape the conclusive grasp of historical comprehension. As his long-term secretary, A. J. Sylvester, once put it, 'his character is the most complex I have ever known'.

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'Let us open to them the door of the House of Commons'

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be displayed. Till we have done this, let us not presume to say that there is no genius among the countrymen of Isaiah, no heroism among the descendants of the Maccabees.

Sir, in supporting the motion of my honourable friend, I am, I firmly believe, supporting the honour and the interests of the Christian religion. I should think that I insulted that religion if I said that it cannot stand unaided by intolerant laws. Without such laws it was established, and without such laws it may be maintained. It triumphed over the superstitions of the most refined and of the most savage nations, over the graceful mythology of Greece and the bloody idolatry of the northern forests. It prevailed over the power and policy of the Roman Empire. It tamed the barbarians by whom that empire was overthrown. But all these victories were gained not by the help of intolerance, but in spite of the opposition of intolerance. The whole history of Christianity proves that she has little indeed to fear from persecution as a foe, but much to fear from persecution as an ally. May she long continue to bless our country with her benignant influence, strong in her sublime philosophy, strong in her spotless morality, strong in those internal and external evidences to which the most powerful and comprehensive of human intellects have yielded assent, the last solace of those who have outlived every earthly hope, the last restraint of those who are raised above every earthly fear! But let not us, mistaking her character and her interests, fight the battle of truth with the weapons of error, and endeavour to support by oppression that religion which first taught the human race the great lesson of universal charity.

Keeper of the Liberal Flame

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John Davies is the eldest son of Ivor Davies, born in 1941 and educated at the universities of Oxford and Sheffield, recently retired from the Publishers Association where he was Director of the Educational Publishers Council, the Council of Academic and Professional Publishers, the Serial Publishers Executive, the Copyright Licensing Agency and the Publishers Licensing Society

- 1 Edinburgh University Personality Series No. 11 – Ivor R.M. Davies in *The Student*, 1 February 1938, p 161.
- 2 Reported in *The Bulletin* (Aberdeen) July 1937.
- 3 Election addresses: Oxford 1938, Central Aberdeenshire 1945, West Aberdeenshire 1950, Oxford 1955, 1959, 1964.
- 4 Profile of the Rev. Roderick G Davies in *The Christian World*, 16 May 1940, p. 3.
- 5 e.g. lead feature in *Glasgow Weekly Herald*, 5 December 1936: 'The Milk Muddle' by Ivor R.M. Davies, p. 8.
- 6 Ian Bradley – 'Oxford 1938 – the first 'War' vote' – *The Times*, 27 October 1978, p. 16.
- 7 Ivor R M Davies, *Trial By Ballot* (London, 1950), pp. 143–44.
- 8 Quoted by Tom Harrison, co-founder of Mass Observation, in *Picture Post*, 5 November 1938.
- 9 'Recount Drama ends Darwen Contest' in *Northern Daily Telegraph*, 1943.
- 10 'Central Aberdeenshire – Result of Poll' in *Huntly Express* 27 July 1945 p. 3.
- 11 See article by Robert Ingham, 'Donald Johnson – the last Liberal Imperialist', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 25, Winter 1999–2000, p. 31.
- 12 Reviewed in *Times Literary Supplement* 23 June 1950 p. 383, *Truth* 18 August 1950 p. 167, *The*

- Economist* 19 August 1950, *The Press and Journal* 13 May 1950, and elsewhere.
- 13 Ivor Davies: obituary in *The Bookseller* by John Davies, 5 December 1986, p. 2240.
- 14 'Mr Davies adopted for Oxford', *Oxford Mail*, 7 June 1952.
- 15 'City Tory majority slashed', *Oxford Times*, 16 October 1964 p. 28.
- 16 'Mr Ivor Davies to stand for Oxford City Council', *Oxford Mail* 28 February 1953.
- 17 Oxford City Council Liberal election address, Wolvercote Ward 1970.
- 18 *Our Olive* (Oxford 1989) p. 95.
- 19 Bernard Levin, writing as Taper in *The Spectator*, September 1961.
- 20 'Ivor Davies – the Man for Oxford', *Liberal News* General Election Campaign edition 1964, p. 1.
- 21 'A royal reward', *Oxford Mail*, 1 November 1984 p. 7.
- 22 'Man of influence for four decades', *Oxford Mail*, 3 December 1986 p. 2. There was no obituary in *Liberal News*.

Bibliographical Note: At their deaths in the late 1980s, Ivor and Jean Davies left behind them a significant collection of press cuttings, election literature and other documents related to their political activities. These have been drawn upon for this article and, where attributed and relevant, some of them are cited in the footnotes. The content of the article, however, also owes much to eyewitness observation and conversations within the family and with friends of the subject over many years.