

# Biography

**Dr J. Graham Jones** looks at the life and political career of the contentious, individualistic, right-wing Liberal MP for Cardiganshire from 1945 until 1966, Captain E. Roderic Bowen MP (1913–2001)

## Grimond's Rival

**E**van Roderic Bowen was born at the small market town of Cardigan on the coast of west Wales on 6 August 1913, the son of a retired businessman who had been much involved in local Liberal politics. He always proudly recalled his family's active involvement in local Liberal politics even when he was a small boy when he had dyed his pet terrier in the Liberal colours. Educated at Cardigan Council School and Cardigan County School, he graduated with first class honours in law at both the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth (forty miles from his home), and St John's College, Cambridge. Periods at the Inns of Court and on the continent led to the call to the bar by the Middle Temple in 1936. Bar practice commenced in 1937, Bowen taking chambers at Cardiff and practising on the South Wales circuit. At the outbreak of hostilities, he twice volunteered for military service, but was rejected on medical grounds before, in 1940, at his third dogged attempt, securing acceptance as a private, in which capacity he served for eighteen months. Securing a commission in the autumn of 1941, he was an officer for six months before being appointed chief instructor in administration of pay duties at a school for officers under the Southern Command. Bowen was later seconded to the staff of the Judge-Advocate General to the Forces, and towards the end of the war participated in duties associated with Courts Martial, Courts for Prisoners of War and the preparation of cases against National War Criminals.

As a barrister, his work often focused on workmen's compensation and he took a particular interest in local government administration. His devotion to Welsh culture was reflected in his involvement in the activities of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion and *Urdd Gobaith Cymru* (the Welsh League of Youth), while he also served as legal advisor to the local Teifi Net Fishermen's Association. Bowen's Liberal antecedents were notable. He addressed a number of political meetings in support of D. O. Evans, his predecessor as Liberal MP for

Cardiganshire since 1932, and R. Hopkin Morris, Independent Liberal MP for the county, 1923–32, who subsequently re-entered the Commons as Liberal MP for neighbouring Carmarthenshire in 1945. He was also approached in connection with the Liberal vacancy at Brecon & Radnor. He played some part in Liberal activities in south Wales and came into contact with the leading Liberals in the area.

In June 1945, after the wholly unexpected death of county MP D. O. Evans, Bowen was chosen, perhaps surprisingly, as the Liberal candidate for his native Cardiganshire over the heads of a number of prominent local Liberals.<sup>1</sup> In the ensuing general election campaign no Conservative contender appeared, and the Liberal platform focused primarily on an attack on 'the rigid and inflexible policy of Socialism'.<sup>2</sup> The Labour candidate in the county was Iwan Morgan, an economist and Cardiff university lecturer with strong Cardiganshire connections. Although the absence of a Tory candidate meant that Bowen's election to parliament was nigh on certain, D. O. Evans, in his last public appearance in the county shortly before his death, had warned local Liberals that, 'It would be very unwise to be overconfident. That attitude of mind would only breed complacency.'<sup>3</sup> In the event he was probably overcautious, for Bowen defeated Morgan by the wide margin of 8194 votes, by far the highest majority of the twelve Liberal MPs returned in 1945, the new MP immediately describing the outcome as 'a victory for personal and political freedom ... a defeat for bureaucracy and state control'.<sup>4</sup> 'The young upstart', chosen against the odds only a few weeks earlier, had, it seemed, already proved his worth.<sup>5</sup> At the same time veteran Liberal Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris narrowly captured highly marginal Carmarthenshire, the only Labour loss in the whole of the United Kingdom, and an enormous personal triumph for him.

Short, stout, bespectacled and balding, Roderic Bowen entered the House of Commons in 1945 as one of a tiny fragment of twelve Liberal MPs, no

fewer than seven of whom represented Welsh divisions. Morale within their ranks was inevitably at an all-time low, for the party had been ravaged beyond belief at the recent poll in a socialist landslide which had engulfed even party leader Sir Archibald Sinclair (by the agonisingly slim margin of 61 votes) at Caithness & Sutherland, and its chief whip, Sir Percy Harris, at Bethnal Green South-West. Other casualties included Sir William Beveridge at Berwick-upon-Tweed, James de Rothschild on the Isle of Ely and veteran Sir Goronwy Owen at Caernarfonshire. Even so, some long-serving Liberal MPs remained at Westminster, and initially Bowen was dwarfed in stature by such figures as Clement Davies (Montgomeryshire), soon to be elected 'chairman' (if not leader) of the fragmented Parliamentary Liberal Party, Lady Megan Lloyd George (Anglesey), self-appointed champion of the party's left wing, her brother Major Gwilym Lloyd George (Pembrokeshire), a notable political maverick moving swiftly to the right, Tom Horabin (North Cornwall), another left-wing radical and the new Liberal chief whip, and Edgar Granville (Eye).<sup>6</sup> They were indeed 'a motley group',<sup>7</sup> totally lacking in cohesion, with no common political philosophy or parliamentary strategy, ever ready to dissent, even rebel, some of its members perched on opposing poles of the political spectrum.

Bowen was soon to make his mark in the Commons as a dextrous, amusing debater, but clearly on the right wing of his tiny party, and generally reluctant to break ranks with the party leadership, always adhering closely to the official party line – 'the plump Welshman with the polished manner'.<sup>8</sup> Lord Emlyn Hooson has written of both Roderic Bowen and R. Hopkin Morris in the 1945–50 parliament as determined to 'have nothing whatever to do with the Labour Party and socialism and were regarded as being of the right'.<sup>9</sup> The novice MP for Cardiganshire participated only occasionally in parliamentary debate, generally speaking on Welsh affairs, often on matters of direct relevance to his constituency. From the outset of his political career, however,

Bowen was generally well-liked at Westminster. His sole critics at the Commons, it seems, were verbatim reporters; when he moved a motion in 1949 to appoint a royal commission on war pensions, it took him all of sixty-eight minutes.

Generally Roderic Bowen tended to be critical of the policies and conduct of the Attlee administrations. As severe economic depression hit the country during the winter of 1947–48, he told his local Liberal Association that the onset of slump was 'because the Government had concentrated on political dogma rather than on facing immediate economic difficulties', warning that both Aneurin Bevan's embryonic National Health Service and the National Insurance Act were 'being threatened by the growing danger of inflation'.<sup>10</sup> As the members of the fractious Parliamentary Liberal Party displayed highly inconsistent, even bizarre, voting records in the Commons lobbies, Bowen's personal performance at the House came under scrutiny, provoking him to retort that 'he had always voted as his judgement dictated', and to point to his support for the setting up of the National Health Service. He asserted that, by following their consciences on each major issue, the small group of Liberal MPs constituted 'a far more critical opposition to the Government than the Official Opposition did'.<sup>11</sup> Yet, although highly critical of doctrinaire socialism, Bowen doggedly renounced an overture from the local Conservative Party that a joint candidate might stand at the next general election, rejoicing in the decision of the Cardiganshire Liberal Party to reject out-of-hand an approach from Sir Arthur Harford, chairman of the Cardiganshire Conservatives, that the two parties might field a joint candidate at the forthcoming election. Ironically, in the neighbouring Pembrokeshire constituency a formal 'Lib-Con' pact was formed to support the re-election of National Liberal (or Liberal and Conservative) MP Major Gwilym Lloyd-George.

Failure to conclude such an agreement in Cardiganshire meant that a keenly contested three-cornered fray was likely in 1950, Bowen fearing for his political future and sensing that

Cardiganshire Tories and local socialists were 'collaborating in their efforts to oust the Liberal member'.<sup>12</sup> His heartfelt pessimism was clearly shared by party leader Clement Davies, who dejectedly wrote to his predecessor, Sir Archibald Sinclair, in the early days of the new year, 'I do not know whether I shall be back here ... Even if I do pull it off, it will be "a damned near thing"'. ... Each of us in Wales will have a very tough fight.' 'No-one knows who will be here' was his pessimistic conclusion only days later.<sup>13</sup> Again Iwan Morgan, reluctantly re-selected by the Cardiganshire Labour Party as its candidate, could point the finger at Roderic Bowen's unimpressive and inconsistent voting record in the Commons lobbies.<sup>14</sup> An intense three-cornered fray threatened to undermine Bowen's position; in his carefully phrased election address he pointedly noted 'the intervention of a third candidate' which, he felt, had 'subsequently increased the danger of the socialist being returned'.<sup>15</sup> In the event, his personal anxiety was misplaced, for he was re-elected by a majority of no fewer than 8,038 votes over Morgan, again the highest margin enjoyed by any of the nine Liberal MPs returned. Bowen had captured 52 per cent of the Cardiganshire vote, and his was the only division apart from Montgomeryshire where the Liberals had secured an absolute majority in a three-cornered contest. Thereafter he was not to face a Conservative opponent until October 1964.

When the second Attlee administration, with its much reduced overall majority, was compelled to go to the country again in the autumn of 1951, Roderic Bowen, now facing a sole Labour opponent, Revd. Brynmor Williams, vicar of Llansamlet, was sure of re-election, increasing his majority to 10,262, again the highest of the six Liberal MPs returned to Westminster, although the turnout in Cardiganshire plummeted sharply. In his election address the Liberal candidate urged his constituents 'to resist any attempts to impose Nationalisation upon our Agricultural Industry and to take land unreasonably for non-agricultural purposes'.<sup>16</sup> But the total number of Liberal MPs



Roderic Bowen in 1950

now shrank to an all-time low of six, while the defeats of Lady Megan Lloyd George (Anglesey) and Emrys O. Roberts (Merionethshire) meant that the three Liberal MPs who remained in Wales – Bowen, Clement Davies and Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris – were all seen as right-wingers, having much in common with Churchill's Conservatives. None had faced a Tory opponent in 1951, suggesting that their political philosophy was acceptable to Conservative Party headquarters. As Conservative local organisation remained relatively weak in these three constituencies, Central Office was generally happy to endorse the re-election of sitting Liberal MPs perched on the right of their tiny party rather than see the seats fall to the Labour Party in three-cornered contests. All three MPs increased their majorities in 1951, but none was the beneficiary of a formal 'Lib-Con' electoral pact as was Donald Wade at Huddersfield West (a perpetuation of the 'Huddersfield arrangement' instituted in 1950) and Arthur Holt at Bolton West. It was generally felt, however, that Clement Davies and Roderic Bowen would have held on even if they had faced Conservative

opponents.<sup>17</sup> Rumours circulated during the 1951 election campaign that Davies might well be offered ministerial office in the event of a Tory victory at the polls (as, in fact, he soon was).

The defeats of Lady Megan and Emrys Roberts also reduced sharply the involvement of Welsh Liberals in the tenacious Parliament for Wales agitation inaugurated in July 1950. In reply to a newspaper questionnaire circulated during October 1951 which included the question, 'Are you in favour of a Welsh Parliament and does your party officially support that view?', Bowen replied, 'Yes, to deal with the domestic problems of Wales, but not in substitution for, but in addition to, Welsh representation at Westminster.'<sup>18</sup> Yet none of the three remaining Welsh Liberal MPs actively endorsed the campaign's activities, Bowen years later attributing his reluctance to participate to his view that 'there were too many political viewpoints represented' within the movement.<sup>19</sup> Generally Bowen had tended to favour the grant of Dominion status to Wales. Presumably Clem Davies's taxing role as party leader during the years of the Welsh Parliament movement prevented

his active involvement, although he was a consistent vocal advocate of the national rights of Wales. But there was some substance to Plaid Cymru gibes that Liberal support for the agitation was at best 'anaemic'.<sup>20</sup>

By the mid 1950s Roderic Bowen was firmly entrenched in his Cardiganshire citadel, the impressive victor of three parliamentary elections by a wide margin. At the end of 1952 a full-time secretary-organiser to the Cardiganshire Liberal Association, in the person of J. Parry Williams, a former employee of the Ministry of Labour, was appointed. The position had previously been vacant for a full eighteen months.<sup>21</sup> The nomination of David Jones Davies, a native of Tregaron within the county, who had served as further education officer for Caernarfonshire, as the county's next Labour candidate spurred county Liberals to overhaul their organisation. 'We are inclined to be slack in our efforts between elections', warned local organiser Mrs Arthian Davies, 'Why should we worry? Mr Bowen is sure to get in, and it is in that attitude that the danger lies.'<sup>22</sup> During 1954 a concerted effort was made to streamline local organisation and increase support for Bowen.<sup>23</sup> At the end of May there was widespread rejoicing in Welsh Liberal circles as Clement Davies celebrated his silver jubilee as Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire. Major J. Parry Brown, chairman of the Liberal Party of Wales, in a major speech assured his listeners that a 'tremendous Liberal revival' was about to happen, triggered by the recent re-establishment of local Liberal associations in many parts of Wales.<sup>24</sup> As yet another election campaigned dawned, intense rumours pervaded Cardiganshire that ill health might well compel Bowen to retire from political life, conjecture which was emphatically repudiated by the Member.<sup>25</sup>

In May 1955 Roderic Bowen faced the Cardiganshire electorate for the fourth general election in succession, again opposed only by a Labour contender, in the person of D.J. Davies. But the 1955 campaign was a more heated affair than the previous contests, characterised by notably venomous personal attacks. Bowen had represented

the county in parliament for nigh on ten years. Almost immediately upon his first election in 1945, however, he had resumed his practice at the Bar and had built up an extensive and lucrative legal business in south Wales. In 1952, at barely thirty-nine years of age, he took silk, an accolade all the more notable because he was the first Welshman to become a QC for fully sixty years. He had been appointed Recorder of Cardiff in 1950 and Recorder of Merthyr Tydfil in 1953. His appearances in his constituency declined, he became slack at attending to correspondence and spoke in the Commons only sparingly, generally on legal matters or Welsh affairs, subjects of especial interest to him. He was absent from many debates of importance to his constituents, and generally seemed to support the Conservative government in the division lobbies. Although he had become President of the Liberal Party of Wales in 1948, and was to be elected chairman of the Welsh Parliamentary Party in 1955, there was a widespread feeling that in his heart of hearts Bowen preferred his highly lucrative legal career to his political and parliamentary work.

At D. J. Davies's adoption meeting at the end of April 1955, D. J. Jones, the president of the Cardiganshire Labour Party, accused Bowen of being the latest in a long line of 'playboy' MPs to represent Cardiganshire: 'No man can pursue a private career and do justice to his constituents at the same time. No man can be in Cardiff and Westminster at the same time.'<sup>26</sup> Bowen responded at his adoption meeting by quoting from the 1955 *Yearbook* of the Cardiganshire branch of the National Farmers' Union: 'Cardiganshire is extremely fortunate in its MP, he was first elected in 1945, and the trust reposed in him by the electors has been amply rewarded for he has always served the county well.'<sup>27</sup> In a straight fight with Labour, the outcome was never in any real doubt, although Bowen's majority was reduced somewhat to 8,817. Somehow, in spite of an appalling Gallup rating of only 2 per cent at the beginning of the election campaign, and a total of no more than 110 candidates, all six Liberal MPs held on, although only one of these – Jo Grimond (Orkney & Shetland) – survived a three-cornered contest, an

impressive personal victory. No Conservative contender appeared in the other five Liberal seats (the only divisions in the whole of the United Kingdom which they did not contest), again the result of a 'Lib-Con' electoral pact at Bolton West and Huddersfield West. Once again Bowen recorded the highest majority of the six Liberals, just ahead of veteran party leader Clement Davies, who polled 8,500 more votes than his sole Labour opponent. None of the six had experienced an especially close shave.

During the winter of 1954–55 Clement Davies had suffered a serious illness and had been forced to spend much of the ensuing spring recuperating. His involvement in the 1955 election campaign, both nationally and in Montgomeryshire, was minimal. Thereafter he faced mounting pressure to retire from the party leadership, for it was widely felt throughout the Liberal Party that more assertive, radical, dynamic helmsmanship was essential.<sup>28</sup> Davies at first seemed reluctant to yield, but eventually announced his retirement at the October 1956 party assembly at Folkestone. The natural successor, by background, temperament and dedication, was Jo Grimond. Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris, now fully sixty-eight years of age, totally lacking in political ambition, and hamstrung by his official position as Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means, was immediately ruled out of the succession. Both Arthur Holt and Donald Wade owed their continued re-election to local Conservative support within their constituencies, and should this be withdrawn, they faced electoral defeat, a situation clearly wholly unacceptable for the leader of a national party. That left only Grimond and Bowen.

Many Welsh Liberals began to press Roderic Bowen's claims as the champion of the tiny party's right wing, ever extolling as he did the virtues of private enterprise and the re-introduction of flogging, strikingly at odds with Grimond's radical anti-Conservative leanings which had led to his frequently advocating a 'Lib-Lab' pact. Most of the party faithful, however, felt that a Bowen leadership, like that of Clement Davies, would have been 'soft and round, and enveloped in a cloud of words'.

Grimond, who had come to prominence at Westminster as his party's chief whip since 1950, was considered generally 'craggier and capable of stirring the faithful with dramatic conference speeches'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Davies may well have held on until the autumn of 1956 against his better judgement to allow Grimond an opportunity to serve his apprenticeship and win his spurs as party whip. At the party assembly Grimond first nominated Bowen for the party leadership, but Bowen, sensing that his rival was the popular choice of the vast majority of delegates, promptly nominated him for the top job. Predictably it was Grimond who won the day, but Bowen still appears to have harboured a grudge, pointedly boycotting the next Liberal Party assembly by taking advantage of a free trip to the United States. Thereafter relations between the two men were distinctly frosty – Grimond did not once even refer to Bowen in his extensive *Memoirs* published in 1979 – and, when he accepted the position of Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (*ex officio* the second Deputy Speaker of the Commons) years later in 1965, Bowen may have been motivated to some extent by feelings of revenge against Grimond and the Liberal Party hierarchy.

Moreover, murmurs of discontent intensified within Cardiganshire. Early in 1957 some members of the Aberystwyth Town Council expressed their concern that Bowen did not participate in the debate on the Rating and Valuation Bill, thus failing to advance the claims of the county and borough, local councillor Elfed Williams protesting, 'Unfortunately the Member for Cardiganshire was not there, and Cardiganshire's views were not pressed.'<sup>30</sup> Again rumours circulated both in the constituency and at Westminster that the Member would not seek the Liberal nomination at the next general election. The conjecture was sharply repudiated by Roderic Bowen: 'It's all twaddle and nonsense. It's a hardy annual put up by the Labour boys when things are quiet. Where did you hear about it?'<sup>31</sup> Soon he found himself one of only five Liberal MPs at the Commons as Carmarthenshire fell to Labour after a hotly contested by-election in February 1957 following the

death of Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris. The pain for the Liberals was all the greater as the Labour victor was Lady Megan Lloyd George, Liberal MP for Anglesey until October 1951 and a convert to socialism only since April 1955. Within Liberal ranks she was widely viewed as a 'defector'; during the intense by-election campaign respected party elder statesman Lord Samuel had felt impelled to warn Carmarthenshire Liberals not to support Lady Megan.

The all-time low point of five Liberal MPs remained for more than a year. In many constituencies the party's organisation was stagnant, financial resources were hopelessly inadequate, there were only thirty salaried party agents throughout Britain, and there remained a desperate need for the strengthening and overhaul of the party's research department to devise radical and progressive new policies.<sup>32</sup> At the end of April 1958 Jo Grimond spoke at Aberystwyth, a rousing speech which underlined the need for a measure of electoral reform to enable support for the Liberal Party to be reflected in the composition of the Commons, but, revealing his left-wing leanings, he went on, 'It would be disastrous for this country if all non-Socialists simply made a "cynical pact" to keep the Labour Party out of office.'<sup>33</sup>

As yet another general election loomed, the secretary of the South Wales Liberal Federation wrote to the party's county organiser in Cardiganshire, 'I am very glad to know ... that there is so much activity in your Constituency which might well be described as the safest seat held by a Liberal member.'<sup>34</sup> Again, for the third general election in succession, local Conservatives resolved to stand aside, almost assuring Roderic Bowen of re-election. But local Socialists had secured a formidable and vivacious candidate in Mrs Loti Rees Hughes, a long-serving member of the Carmarthenshire County Council, whose husband, Alderman W. Douglas Hughes, was the local political agent to Jim Griffiths MP for Llanelli.<sup>35</sup> Once again there was criticism of Roderic Bowen for taking a 'part-time' attitude to his political work, county Labour Party president D. J. Davies asserting to his party's annual general meeting at the end of February that:

It is my belief that the time has come when we should ask the Member of Parliament to give all his time to Parliament for the benefit of the people of Cardiganshire. In these days when the tempo of all things has increased so much, the value of a Member of Parliament to his constituents lies in his being part of a pressure group, and his influence in that group depends in no small measure on the amount of hard work he puts in on behalf of his constituents.

In order that MPs can do this, their salaries have been raised to £1,750 per year and expenses. Parliament is the only place where a person can get £1,750 and expenses, and turn up for work when he likes or not at all. If any other worker did that he would get the sack.

The time has come when MPs should be asked to give their whole time to Parliament or not at all. No man can serve two masters; he will neglect one master, and love the other.

One of the questions the Labour Party asked our Prospective Candidate was: 'Are you prepared to devote the whole of your time to Parliament if you are elected?' Mrs Loti Rees Hughes has given a firm promise that she would do so.

So I say to you in Cardiganshire, when the General Election comes, vote for Loti Hughes and get a full-time MP for Cardiganshire.<sup>36</sup>

Again Bowen's disappointing and inconsistent voting record in the Commons lobbies was carefully scrutinised; during the 1958–59 parliamentary session he had voted in only 106 out of a total possible 177 divisions, he had supported the government on 72 occasions and the Labour opposition on 34.<sup>37</sup> It would appear that the Labour Party organisation in Cardiganshire and nationally entertained genuine aspirations of victory; in the words of local party agent Ron Bundock, 'We are going to shock Cardiganshire, the country and Transport House. I am extremely *confident* and the reports coming in each day are encouraging. The feeling in the county is different to any I have known

in previous elections.'<sup>38</sup> A novel dimension was provided by the first-ever Plaid Cymru candidature in Cardiganshire's history, in the person of Dr Gareth Evans, a native of the county and a Swansea lecturer. But the Labour campaign did not receive the recognition at the polls so widely anticipated, and Roderic Bowen was again re-elected by a majority of 9,309 votes over Labour. Like other Liberal MPs such as Arthur Holt and Donald Wade, he had been returned, for the third time in succession, with the tacit support of local Conservative sympathisers. This was, however, to be the last occasion on which this happened. Local socialists, although grievously disappointed at the outcome of the 1959 election, realistically saw the presence of at least 'a hard core of 8,500 Labour voters' in Cardiganshire and were spurred to redouble their efforts.<sup>39</sup>

As a new decade – the 1960s – began, the political life of remote, largely rural Cardiganshire inevitably became much less insular. The influence of nonconformity and temperance demands seemed much less relevant to the new generation. Distinctive local and regional problems came to the fore, crystallised in proposals for the reorganisation of Welsh local government and calls for a development corporation for mid-Wales. In the wake of the infamous 'Beeching axe', the key Aberystwyth–Carmarthen railway line, a vital life-line in mid-Wales, ceased to carry passengers. Nationalist impulses crystallised locally in the earliest protests during 1963 of the fledgling *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (the Welsh Language Society), blocking the traffic over the bridge near Aberystwyth and plastering the town's main post office with notices demanding official status for the Welsh language. A contrary view soon surfaced in protests from non-Welsh speakers at the increasing preponderance of Welsh language television broadcasts which they could not avoid.


Roderic Bowen did not change his style of representation one iota. His appearances in the constituency were few and fleeting, his participation in Commons debates a rarity, his political life clearly taking at best second place to his ever-increasing legal activities. During the

1959–60 parliamentary session he took part in only 61 out of a total of 141 divisions. In the latter year he took up the position of Recorder of Swansea, and in 1964 was appointed Recorder of Cardiff. From 1959, following in the footsteps of Clement Davies QC, he also became chairman of the Montgomeryshire Quarter Sessions, a position he held until 1971. When he was present in the Commons, his attention was absorbed primarily by his strong anti-nuclear views and his opposition to the British invasion of Egypt in 1956.

Described by the *Manchester Guardian* in 1952 as 'one of the most successful advocates at the Welsh bar', his political impact was much less.<sup>40</sup> Indeed by the early 1960s Bowen seemed to many to be the last in a long line of successful Welsh barristers who simply doubled up as a Liberal MP. In August 1962 and again in June 1964 he spoke briefly in the Commons on the need to introduce industrial initiatives into mid-Wales, strengthen the authority of the Development Commissioners and tackle the vexed problem of rural depopulation.<sup>41</sup> But such interventions were rare, brief and made little lasting impression. In August 1964 the secretary of the North Wales Liberal Federation wrote critically of Emlyn Hooson, who in May 1962 had succeeded Clement Davies as MP for Montgomeryshire, 'I am inclined to think he ought to spend more time on his job as Member of Parliament or else we shall have another Roderic Bowen ... one who does not spend much time in his constituency.'<sup>42</sup>

As disenchantment with Bowen grew, Labour were spurred to redouble their local efforts, opening a new county headquarters at Aberystwyth and choosing long-serving local president David John Davies as their prospective parliamentary candidate. In October 1964 Cardiganshire became a marginal constituency. The decision of the Conservatives to put up their own candidate for the first time since 1950, coupled with the national swing to Labour, cut Bowen's majority sharply to 2219. Of the five Liberal MPs who had stood successfully for re-election – Bowen, Jo Grimond, Emlyn Hooson, Eric Lubbock (the Orpington victor of

General Election, 1955 - Cardiganshire Constituency



Roderic Bowen, Q.C., M.A., LL.B.

# VOTE FOR BOWEN

## The Liberal Candidate

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**The CANDIDATE who has given faithful service  
to his COUNTY and his COUNTRY**

March 1962) and Jeremy Thorpe – the MP for Cardiganshire now enjoyed by far the smallest majority. In the same contest, Tory intervention simultaneously unseated Arthur Holt at Bolton West and Donald Wade at Huddersfield West. Bowen's total poll had fallen by more than 6,300 votes and Labour could scent the prospect of victory. The MP for Cardiganshire was unlikely, it was felt, to mend his ways.

Events soon took a bizarre turn with the sudden death of the Speaker of the House of Commons, Sir Harry Hylton-Foster, as he walked along Duke Street, St James's, London SW, on 2 September 1965.<sup>43</sup> The question of his successor caused a crisis for Harold Wilson's Labour government, which had a tiny overall majority of only three seats in the Commons. It was widely anticipated

that the Deputy Speaker, Dr Horace King (Labour, Itchen), would succeed, and that the Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means, Sir Samuel Storey (Conservative, Stretford), would in turn become Deputy Speaker. This would then leave vacant the position of Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (who was *ex officio* the second Deputy Speaker). The ideal solution for the beleaguered Labour administration was to persuade a Liberal MP to accept the position. Most of these lacked the long experience necessary of Commons procedures, but two did not – the party leader, Jo Grimond, and Roderic Bowen, veteran MP of nigh on twenty years.

It was considered unthinkable for Grimond even to countenance the vacancy; he had no successor as Liberal Party leader.<sup>44</sup> But Bowen demurred.

He had much to lose – he still enjoyed a flourishing, highly lucrative practice at the Bar as a QC and Leader of the Wales and Chester Circuit and the status and salary of Recorder of Swansea. Discussions followed between Ted Short and Eric Lubbock, the government and Liberal chief whips. Bowen's name was mooted, but most prominent Liberals did not disguise their annoyance, reluctant 'to run the risk of losing their electoral identity by consenting to an expedient arrangement in which they would take the responsibility of prolonging the Government's life without having any say in what the Government does'.<sup>45</sup> It was well known that there was little love lost between the two senior Liberal MPs, Grimond commenting pointedly that the decision was purely a personal one for Bowen. Desperately anxious to avoid an early general election at an unfavourable time for his government, Harold Wilson (who had just told George Brown, his secretary of state for economic affairs, that their government's economic policies amounted to 'a pretty dismal and gloomy set of squeezes', necessitating the introduction of measures 'of a popular and heart-warming character'<sup>46</sup>) probably cajoled Bowen into accepting the vacant position.

The decision horrified most of Bowen's Liberal colleagues at Westminster, and many staunch Liberals in Cardiganshire, where his motives were keenly debated during the ensuing 1966 general election campaign. Here was a firmly right-wing MP, his policies close to the Tories in many respects, propping up an ailing Labour government clearly up against the ropes, ever liable to collapse. 'The Prime Minister has brought off his coup', rejoiced Labour Minister of Housing and diarist Richard Crossman, 'Our majority of three has not been cut to one!'<sup>47</sup> Bowen's decision immediately nourished speculation about a possible 'Lib-Lab' pact at Westminster and confirmed the Prime Minister's well established reputation as a dextrous political manipulator, capable of out-manoeuvring the newly elected Conservative leader Ted Heath and the opposition, a master *par excellence* of the 'politics of survival'.<sup>48</sup>

After all, what had Bowen to gain personally? He had made enormous material sacrifices in return for a modest parliamentary salary of £3,750, plus the standard parliamentary allowance of £1,250 which was available to all MPs. To add insult to injury, he had accepted Wilson's offer without even consulting Jo Grimond, and had angered most of his fellow Liberal MPs whose voting strength was consequently reduced from ten to nine. Of the Parliamentary Liberal Party, only fellow Welshman Emlyn Hooson and David Steel, the newest Liberal MP, came out in support of his decision to accept the office. Bowen may have been looking to get his own back on Grimond for taking the party leadership nine years earlier. He may have been eyeing the Speaker's chair, for which he was reasonably well suited, or he may have hoped that Harold Wilson would one day reward him with a judgeship, perhaps even a peerage on his eventual retirement from the House of Commons. If so, he miscalculated badly; only very minor rewards, in the form of service on public bodies in his later career, lay ahead. The peerage which many expected him to receive never materialised.

Roderic Bowen's decision came at a particularly vexed time for his party, especially in its relationship with the Labour government, a theme which had dominated the Liberal assembly only the previous month. Jo Grimond, ever ready to consider any amicable working arrangement with Labour, anticipated possible 'real enthusiasm' for 'common aims behind which a majority could unite', but, he went on, 'The throwing of life-belts to a sinking Government is not a job I would welcome.'<sup>49</sup> Bowen, it appeared, had indeed thrown a life-belt to Wilson's government.

In any case, his parliamentary career was drawing to a close. Ever since October 1964 the Labour Party hierarchy had considered Cardiganshire a crucial marginal which lay within their grasp. Their new parliamentary candidate was Elystan Morgan, an articulate young lawyer who had actually stood as the Plaid Cymru candidate at Wrexham in 1955 and 1959 and Merionethshire in 1964, and who had changed parties only in August 1965, shortly before his

selection as the Labour candidate for Cardiganshire.<sup>50</sup> He enjoyed a network of family contacts throughout the north of the county, and appeared to enjoy extensive Plaid Cymru support in spite of his change of allegiance. Bowen seemed to make even less effort than in previous election campaigns, undertook but little canvassing, and was content to rely on the county's Liberal tradition and his bedrock of loyal supporters. Ominously, Jo Grimond refused to send his colleague a personal letter of support during the crucial election campaign although asked to do so by the president of the Cardiganshire Liberal Association, and this became well known in the constituency during the campaign.<sup>51</sup> On this occasion Labour swept to victory by 523 votes, capturing no fewer than 32 of the 36 Welsh constituencies, a record high never repeated before or since, its dramatic breakthrough in Cardiganshire extending its hegemony over all the constituencies of the western seaboard of Wales. Cardiganshire was one of eleven constituencies captured by Labour in 1966 which it had never previously held. To some extent the loss of Cardiganshire, held continuously by the Liberals ever since 1880, was offset by four Liberal gains, among them Colne Valley (Richard Wainwright), North Cornwall (John Pardoe) and Cheadle (Dr Michael Winstanley).<sup>52</sup>

Although the writing had been on the wall since at least October 1964, Roderic Bowen was, it seems, still disappointed by his defeat. At only fifty-two years of age, at the height of his powers and political maturity, with more than thirty-five years of life still ahead of him, he shunned party politics thereafter, rarely venturing to the county.

In the wake of his defeat, he was sent by Foreign Secretary George Brown to Aden to investigate interrogation procedures in the British colony, which had been subject to international criticism, notably by Amnesty International. His report found, by implication, that the claims were exaggerated, though not baseless, and proposed a number of changes to ensure that they did not recur. Bowen's report was admirable as far as it went. Its terms of reference, however, were perhaps too limited. He was

asked to decide whether particular cases of alleged ill-treatment were true or not, and he did hear the point of view of the former investigators.

In 1967 Bowen became National Insurance Commissioner for Wales, resigning his position as Recorder of Cardiff, and he remained in the post until 1986. In the spring of 1971 he was appointed chairman of a governmental committee charged to examine road signs policy in Wales set up by Peter Thomas, Secretary of State for Wales in the Heath Government, in response to a campaign for bilingualism spearheaded by *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (the Welsh Language Society). The committee took its work seriously, even travelling to Finland and other countries to contrast the situation there, and its majority report, which appeared in the autumn of 1972, was generally in favour of bilingual signs: 'The chief arguments hinge on the place of Welsh in Wales, on the principle of "natural justice" for the Welsh language.'<sup>33</sup> From 1977 to 1992 Bowen also served as a conscientious president of St David's University College, Lampeter.

Apart from his brief brushes with fame in 1956 and 1965, Roderic Bowen's impact at Westminster was minimal, yet he was generally popular with politicians of all parties and his relaxed bonhomie and quick repartee in the smoking rooms of the Commons stood in striking contrast to his serious, tight-lipped professional demeanour when acting in the courts.<sup>34</sup> A potentially amusing and clever debater, capable of gracing Liberal platforms with wit and distinction, he was much sought after as an after-dinner speaker. He remained a Liberal MP throughout the long, arduous years of Clement Davies's leadership of the party from 1945, but had little rapport with Davies's successor Jo Grimond who, in Bowen's view, seemed intent on seeking 'a realignment of the Left' in British politics. A lack of mutual understanding and admiration between these two senior Liberal MPs resulted. Hence Bowen became increasingly aloof and detached from the vortex of political life at Westminster, rather on a limb from the mainstream of the Parliamentary Liberal Party, attending the Commons at

best irregularly, participating in debate but rarely.

A warm admirer of Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris, Bowen's Liberal credentials were impeccable, reflected in his unwavering belief in the responsibility of the individual and the duty of each one to contribute to the betterment of society. Although veering generally to the right in the political spectrum, sharply opposed to socialism and communism, he was just as dismissive of the claims of those vested interests championed by the Conservative Party. Bowen's Welsh patriotism was beyond question, reflected in his stalwart support for equality for Wales with Scotland and for Welsh representation in the Cabinet, a commitment recognised by both the National Eisteddfod, which he attended regularly, and the University of Wales. An individual of deep religious convictions, he became a deacon of the Presbyterian church. A life-long bachelor, tending in his last years to be a recluse living frugally in a small flat in the Welsh capital and suffering from deteriorating health, Roderic Bowen died at Cardiff on 18 July 2001.

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*The author is grateful to Robert Ingham for reading an earlier draft of this article with meticulous care and for making a number of most helpful suggestions for its revision; and is indebted to him for sending me a detailed summary of his interview with Roderic Bowen on 26 July 1995.*

- 1 National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), Cardiganshire Liberal Association Records, no. 1, minute book, 1923–50, minutes of special meeting, 16 June 1945.
- 2 *Cambrian News*, 29 June 1945.
- 3 *Cambrian News*, 29 June 1945.
- 4 *Cambrian News*, 3 August 1945.
- 5 The phrase is that used in NLW, Clement Davies Papers Q4/126, 'Ifor', Cambridge, to Stanley Clement-Davies, 20 June 1945. I am most grateful to Mr Stanley Clement-Davies, London, for permission to make use of his father's papers.
- 6 See David M. Roberts, 'Clement Davies and the Liberal Party, 1929–56', unpublished University of Wales MA thesis, 1975, pp. 87–92; J. Graham Jones, 'The Liberal Party and Wales, 1945–79', *Welsh History Review*, Vol. 16, no. 3 (June 1993), 329–33.
- 7 The phrase is that used in Roberts, 'Clement Davies', p. 87.
- 8 Victor Thompson in the *Daily Herald*, 18 March

- 1950.
- 9 Lord Hooson, *Rebirth or Death? Liberalism in Wales in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century*, the 1993 Welsh Political Archive Lecture (Aberystwyth: the National Library of Wales, 1994), p. 2.
- 10 NLW, Cardiganshire Liberal Association Records, no. 1, minute book, 1923–50, AGM minutes, 8 November 1947.
- 11 *Ibid.*, executive committee minutes, 19 February 1949.
- 12 NLW, Cardiganshire Liberal Association Records, no. 1, minute book, 1923–50, executive committee minutes, 28 May 1949, AGM minutes, 29 October 1949.
- 13 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J3/10 and J3/12, Davies to Sinclair, 6 and 17 January 1950 (copies).
- 14 *Cambrian News*, 17 February 1950.
- 15 Election address of E. R. Bowen, February 1950.
- 16 Election address of E. R. Bowen, October 1951.
- 17 *The Times*, 31 March 1951, p. 4. On election 'pacts' in 1951 and reactions to them, see also Roy Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party, 1895–1970* (London, 1971), p. 262.
- 18 *Cambrian News*, 19 October 1951.
- 19 Alan Butt Philip, *The Welsh Question: Nationalism in Welsh Politics, 1945–1970* (Cardiff, 1975), p. 259.
- 20 *Welsh Nation*, May 1956.
- 21 *Western Mail*, 1 December 1952.
- 22 *Welsh Gazette*, 5 November 1953.
- 23 NLW, Cardiganshire Liberal Association Records, file 56, memorandum entitled 'The Importance of the Next Six Months', dated 1954.
- 24 *Welsh Gazette*, 29 July 1954.
- 25 *Western Mail*, 19 April 1955.
- 26 *Cambrian News*, 26 April 1955.
- 27 *Welsh Gazette*, 13 May 1955.
- 28 For a somewhat negative view of Liberal Party attitudes to Clement Davies at this time, see Geoffrey Sell, 'A sad business': The resignation of Clement Davies', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 24 (Autumn 1999), 14–17.
- 29 The phrases are taken from Bowen's obituary by Andrew Roth in *The Guardian*, 25 July 2001, p. 20. Douglas, *op. cit.*, p. 268, dismisses Bowen as 'too busy with his legal practice' even to consider the vacant party leadership.
- 30 *Cambrian News*, 15 February 1957.
- 31 NLW, Cardiganshire Liberal Association Records, file 135, unlabelled press cutting.
- 32 See NLW, Clement Davies Papers C1/107, W. H. Grey to Lord Byers, 10 March 1958 (copy). Jo Grimond's decisive contribution was to set up a number of new policy committees, each with specific areas of responsibility, to devise radical novel policies.
- 33 *Cambrian News*, 2 May 1958.
- 34 NLW, Cardiganshire Liberal Association Records, file 56, J. Ellis Williams, honorary secretary of the South Wales Liberal Federation, to E. Jones, 11 February 1959.
- 35 J. Graham Jones, 'The Cardiganshire election of 1959', *Ceredigion*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (1994), 84–105. There is much valuable material on this intriguing contest in the Deian R. Hopkin Papers at the National Library of Wales.
- 36 *Welsh Gazette*, 5 March 1959.
- 37 NLW, Deian R. Hopkin Papers, file 135, John Milwood, Labour Party research department, to James Griffiths, 20 October 1959.
- 38 *Ibid.*, R. J. Bundock to W. Douglas Hughes, 26 September 1959.
- 39 *Ibid.*, file 136, Cardiganshire Labour Party minute book, 1958–65, entry for 31 October 1959. Cf.



- the *Welsh Gazette*, 14 November 1959, for a detailed account of the 1959 AGM of the Cardiganshire Liberal Association and its reaction to the outcome of the recent general election.
- 40 Cited in Bowen's obituary in *The Guardian*, 25 July 2001, p. 20.
- 41 See the reports in *The Times*, 3 August 1962, p. 6, col. g, and *ibid.*, 26 June 1964, p. 15, col. e.
- 42 NLW, Lord Ogmores Papers, file 3, Margaret J. Lawson, secretary of the North Wales Liberal Federation, to Lord Ogmores, 3 August 1964.
- 43 See *The Times*, 3 September 1965, p. 10, cols. a–b.
- 44 *Liberal News*, 17 September 1965, p. 1.
- 45 *The Times*, 14 September 1965, p. 10, cols. c–e.
- 46 Cited in Bowen's obituary in the *Daily Telegraph*, 23 July 2001.
- 47 Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, Vol. 1: Minister of Housing, 1964–66* (London, 1975), p. 362, diary entry for 26 October 1965.
- 48 The phrase is that used in Kenneth O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History, 1945–1989* (London, 1990), p. 250.
- 49 Jo Grimond, 'The Liberals and the Government', *Guardian*, 20 September 1965. See also Alan Watkins, 'Mr Grimond spells it out', *The Spectator*, 24 September 1965, for an astute commentary on the Liberal leader's views and policies. There is a perspicacious analysis of the problems facing the Liberal Party during these years in 'The Liberal predicament', chapter IV of D. E. Butler and Anthony King, *The British General Election of 1966* (London, 1966), pp. 74–84.
- 50 Howard C. Jones, 'The Labour Party in Cardiganshire', *Ceredigion*, Vol. 9, no. 2 (1981), 160.
- 51 See the reflections on the 1966 contest of Dr. E. G. Millward, the Plaid Cymru candidate, in *Golwg*, vol. 13, no. 46 (26 July 2001), 6. See also the text of the Robert Ingham interview with Roderic Bowen, 26 July 1995.
- 52 See *Liberal News*, 7 April 1966, and *The Times*, 1 April 1966, p. 12, col. a.
- 53 *The Times*, 30 November 1972, p. 4, col. f.
- 54 There is a thoughtful and warm tribute penned by Lord (Emlyn) Hooson in *Liberal Democrat News*, no. 675 (7 September 2001), 4.

## Research in Progress

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 2) for inclusion here.

**The party agent and English electoral culture, c.1880 – c.1906.** The development of political agency as a profession, the role of the election agent in managing election campaigns during this period, and the changing nature of elections, as increased use was made of the press and the platform. *Kathryn Rix, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 2BU; awr@bcs.org.uk.*

**Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16.** *Andrew Gardner, 22 Birdbrook House, Popham Road, Islington, London N1 8TA; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

**The Hon H. G. Beaumont (MP for Eastbourne 1906–10).** Any information welcome, particularly on his political views (he stood as a Radical). *Tim Beaumont, 40 Elms Road, London SW4 9EX.*

**Edmund Lamb (Liberal MP for Leominster 1906–10).** Any information on his election and period as MP; wanted for biography of his daughter, Winfred Lamb. *Dr David Gill, d.gill@appleonline.net.*

**Joseph King (Liberal MP for North Somerset during the Great War).** Any information welcome, particularly on his links with the Union of Democratic Control and other opponents of the war (including his friend George Raffalovich). *Colin Houlding; COLGUDIN@aol.com*

**The political life and times of Josiah Wedgwood MP.** Study of the political life of this radical MP, hoping to shed light on the question of why the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the primary popular representatives of radicalism in the 1920s. *Paul Mulvey, 112 Richmond Avenue, London N1 0LS; paulmulvey@yahoo.com.*

**Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935.** Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

**Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39.** *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

**Crouch End or Hornsey Liberal Association or Young Liberals in the 1920s and 1930s;** especially any details of James Gleeson or Patrick Moir, who are believed to have been Chairmen. *Tony Marriott, Flat A, 13 Coleridge Road, Crouch End, London N8 8EH.*

**Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s.** Focussing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. *Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN*

**The Liberal Party and the wartime coalition 1940–45.** Sources, particularly on Sinclair as Air Minister, and on Harcourt Johnstone, Dingle Foot, Lord Sherwood and Sir Geoffrey Maunders (Sinclair's PPS) particularly welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; ian.hunter@curtishunter.co.uk.*

**Clement Davies – research for the first full biography.** Of particular interest are the activities of government departments where Clement Davies worked in the First World War, including Enemy Activities in Neutral Countries, Economic Warfare and Trading with the Enemy; also the period 1939–42, after Davies left the Liberal Nationals but before he rejoined the independent Liberals, and his relationships with MacDonald, Boothby, Attlee and Churchill. *Alun Wyburn-Powell; awyburn-powell@beeb.net.*

**The Unservile State Group, 1953–1970s.** *Dr Peter Barberis, 24 Lime Avenue, Flixton, Manchester M41 5DE.*

**The Young Liberal Movement 1959–1985;** including in particular relations with the leadership, and between NLYL and ULS. *Carrie Park, 89 Coombe Lane, Bristol BS9 2AR; clp25@hermes.cam.ac.uk.*

**The revival of the Liberal Party in the 1960s and '70s;** including the relationships between local and parliamentary electoral performance. Access to party records (constituency- and ward-level) relating to local activity in London and Birmingham, and interviews with key activists of particular interest. *Paul Lambe, University of Plymouth; paul.lambe@ntlworld.com.*

**The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79.** Individual constituency papers, and contact with members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*