

Raising more money is vital. He is enjoying his relatively new role as Chief Executive, in which he retains his overall campaigning responsibility. He believes he has helped to raise headquarters morale and that he now has a very effective team to whom he can delegate, but he also knows he must raise more funds. 'That must be my principal priority. Lack of money holds us back. We need it, not to spend on advertising but to get ourselves more free publicity and to boost our target seats' he says.

With all that he takes on himself, does he ever have any spare time and what does he like doing with it? 'I have very little but I do like to switch off at Christmas and New Year and spend time with Liverpool friends, my wife's family and my younger brother, who still lives in Liverpool. In the summer we like to go to a nice house in France with good food, wine,

a swimming pool and friends. I also like cooking. I am very fortunate in my very supportive wife Ann. She's a teacher and was an activist in the party in Liverpool when we married in 1989. She comes to lots of party functions with me and in by-elections she catches up with me for an intimate Chinese meal at midnight with twenty other workers! And yes, I do enjoy being a peer but, apart from voting, I don't play a very active part.'

Well, there is an admission! If Chris did have more time for the House of Lords, it might be very different place. But, most of all, like Tim Razzall with whom he works very closely, he relishes political crunches, and there are plenty of those to come.

*Shorter and earlier versions of these interviews appeared in Liberal Democrat News in November and December 2003.*

the youngest King's Counsels of his day, he subsequently went on to achieve a successful business career in which he became a director of Unilever.

He was elected to Parliament for Montgomeryshire, his home county, in 1929. Liberal politics were fluid in the 1930s and Davies became a Simonite. He seconded the motion on the King's Speech in 1932. His early political career is a paradox. As Liberal Party leader Davies was to champion the party's independence. Yet in the 1930s he was a supporter of the Conservative-dominated administrations. This political inconsistency was not lost on Churchill, when Davies complained to him, in 1950, about Conservative candidates using the prefix Liberal in their nomenclature. Churchill replied:

As you were yourself for 11 years a National Liberal, and in that capacity supported the Governments of Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain, I should not presume to correct your knowledge of the moral,

# REVIEWS

## The forgotten leader

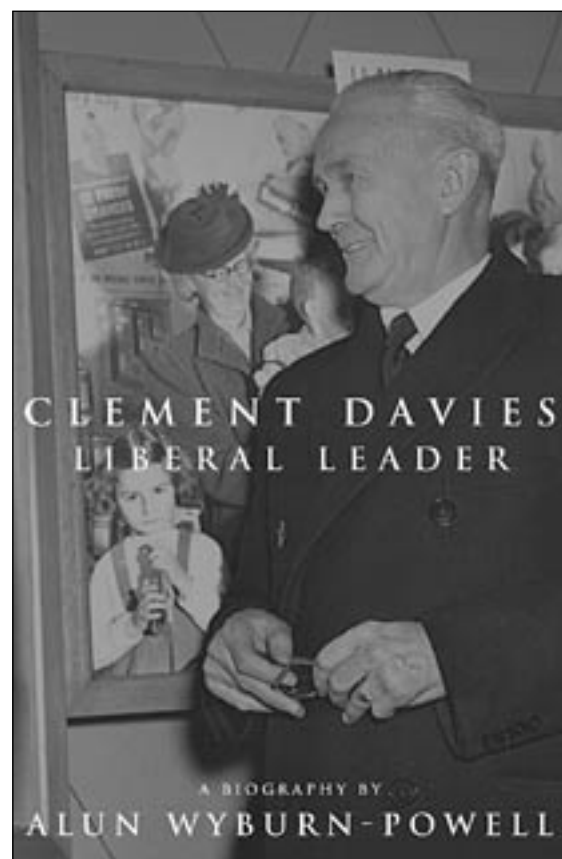
Alan Wyburn-Powell: *Clement Davies: Liberal Leader* (Politico's, 2003)

Reviewed by **Geoffrey Sell**

How many Liberal Democrats could name the Liberal Party's first post-war leader? Rather few, I suspect. Of course, it was all a long time ago; nearly half a century has elapsed since Clement Davies relinquished the leadership in favour of Jo Grimond. However, it is not just the passage of time but Davies' place in the Liberal hall of fame that provides the explanation. Whilst Grimond's star has shone brightly in the Liberal firmament, Davies' has

been eclipsed. He has been described as the forgotten leader. Alan Wyburn-Powell therefore performs a valuable service in rescuing his subject from political obscurity.

Davies was an emotional man, and his life story is one that stirs the emotions. It is a story of significant achievement. Born in rural Wales in 1884 and educated at a state school, he obtained a place at Trinity Hall College, Cambridge, where he obtained a first in Law. One of



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intellectual and legal aspects of adding a prefix or a suffix to the honoured name of Liberal.<sup>1</sup>

Davies was clear that he had not wavered in his Liberal allegiance. Writing to Lord Davies in 1939, he stated:

Since 1900 I have spoken on Liberal platforms at every election and I have never stood on a Conservative platform, not even a Conservative supporter of the National Government.<sup>2</sup>

Until the outbreak of the Second World War Davies was an archetypal semi-detached MP, devoting much of his time to his business interests. War, however, brought Davies into political prominence. As Chairman of the Vigilantes Group he played a key role in the displacement of Chamberlain in favour of Churchill. Labour MP Emmanuel Shinwell described him as 'something of a kingmaker'; Chamberlain referred to his erstwhile supporter as 'that treacherous Welshman'. Davies relinquished the Liberal National whip in December 1939 and rejoined the Liberal Party in 1942.

War also brought personal tragedy for Davies. Three of his children died in unrelated accidents, all at the age of 24. It is perhaps not surprising that he took solace in alcohol, something most of his political contemporaries were unaware of. According to Wyburn-Powell the effects of his drinking binges were short-term memory loss and loss of temper.

The 1945 general election continued the Liberal Party's decline and propelled Davies to centre stage. The unexpected defeat of party leader Sir Archibald Sinclair resulted in Davies being chosen as Chairman of the parliamentary party. He was seen by many as essentially a caretaker leader until Sinclair's return. Davies' chequered political career made him 'not one of the most acceptable Liberal leaders'.<sup>3</sup>

**This biography has strengths: it reveals new information about Davies' early life, it is well sourced and makes good use of work done by History Group members. However, it is not the definitive account of the Liberal Party under Davies' leadership. That book is still to be written.**

There is a strong element of pathos about Davies' leadership of the Liberal Party. The author rightly credits him with preserving the party's independence by refusing Churchill's offer of a post in his government after the 1951 general election. Davies won the battle for political survival when to some it seemed to be a living corpse. It was not inevitable that the Liberal Party would have survived. There is no continuous third force in the United States; there is no necessity to have a third party. Davies' leadership, however, had a heroic quality: a David battling against the Goliath of a seemingly all-powerful two-party system. This courage in the face of adversity was clearly demonstrated when Davies wrote:

You are quite right, we are not crushed or chloroformed and if we have to go down it will be fighting, knowing that even if we are shot down, our cause will still go on and will ultimately prevail.<sup>4</sup>

The pathos is powerfully captured in journalist Henry Fairlie's portrait:

To him every political platform is a pulpit. When he rises to address an audience, there is a great sadness in his face, which if it does not prophesy disaster for the nation, at least foretells martyrdom for himself.<sup>5</sup>

Clement Davies had all the tears and few of the joys of leading a party. There is no doubt that he held the pass during the most treacherous years in Liberal history; he enabled the party to build again. Was this a sufficient legacy? Could he have done more? Although the author is aware of some of Davies' deficiencies he gives a rather too sympathetic account. He states that Davies was a 'natural opposition politician'. Many Liberals active during his leadership would disagree with this assessment.

Although Davies kept the Liberal Party in the battle, it was in the words of a former party agent, more 'through diligence than inspiration'.<sup>6</sup> Davies was a kind man, commented one Liberal activist, but 'he would not set the world alight'. Phyllis Preston, the party's press officer, was scathing in her assessment: 'He did his best, but it was not good enough. He hadn't the makings of a leader. Hadn't the dynamism.'<sup>7</sup> Contemporary newspaper accounts were also critical of Davies' failure to offer a clear strategy and vision for the party. In his speech to the 1953 party assembly it was noted that, apart from a detailed reference to local government reform, he made no attempt to break down into hard practical policies the broad principles of the radical programme adopted the previous year.<sup>8</sup> The Assembly was desperately seeking a lead, but was not given one. At the 1955 Assembly, where Grimond stood in for Davies who was ill, the *Economist* commented that 'for one moment of hope in the sunshine, the Party felt that it just might have found a leader to take it out of the wilderness into which the Welsh condemned it.'<sup>9</sup>

This biography has strengths: it reveals new information about Davies' early life, it is well sourced and makes good use of work done by History Group members. However, it is not the definitive account of the Liberal Party under Davies' leadership. That book is still to be written.

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- 1 H. G. Nicholas, *The British General Election of 1950* (London: Macmillan, 1951), p. 85.
- 2 Letter to Lord Davies (his predecessor as MP for Montgomeryshire) dated 3 January 1939 – Clement Davies Papers, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.
- 3 Letter to reviewer dated 15 February 1986 from the late Emrys Roberts, MP for Merioneth

- 1945–51.
- 4 Letter dated 27 January 1948 from Clement Davies to A. P. Wadsworth, Editor *Manchester Guardian*. *Guardian Archives*, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.
  - 5 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 13 February 1950.
  - 6 Letter from the late Sir Leonard Smith to reviewer dated 1 February 1986.
  - 7 Interview with the late Phyllis Preston by the reviewer, 17 November 1988.
  - 8 *Manchester Guardian*, 9 April 1953.
  - 9 *The Economist*, 23 April 1955.

## 'Why was I born at this time ... to know more dead than living people?'

Colin Clifford: *The Asquiths* (John Murray, 2002)

Reviewed by **Iain Sharpe**

The political fortunes of the Asquith family were destroyed by the First World War. In the summer of 1914, H. H. Asquith had been prime minister for more than six years. With the Conservative Party in disarray and demoralised, Asquith's Liberal Party could look forward to an unprecedented fourth successive election victory.

The Asquiths seemed likely to become a political dynasty, like the Chamberlains or the Churchills. H. H. Asquith's eldest son Raymond had been one of the most brilliant Oxford scholars of his generation. Both Raymond and Herbert, his second son, had followed in their father's footsteps in becoming President of the Oxford Union and being called to the bar. Both intended to pursue political careers. Asquith's second marriage to society figure Margot Tennant in 1894 gave the family an air of social glamour in addition to intellectual and political prowess. Asquith's remaining three children from his first marriage, Arthur ('Oc'), Cyril ('Cys') and Violet were, like their elder siblings, both clever and talented.

The Asquiths' political fortunes were not to last, however. By the end of the First World War, Asquith had been ousted from office, and in the general election of 1918 he lost his

parliamentary seat. The Liberal Party collapsed, although Lloyd George continued to head a Conservative-dominated coalition. Raymond had been killed at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and Herbert never really recovered from his experiences in the First World War. Violet, who was described by Winston Churchill as her father's 'champion redoubtable' in the years after his fall from power, was a stalwart of the Liberal Party for many years, but her own attempts to enter parliament were unsuccessful.

Colin Clifford's book is a family rather than a political biography of the Asquiths, although inevitably politics is never far from centre stage. This study complements the volumes of Violet Bonham-Carter's letters and diaries that have been published over the past decade, giving a clearer portrait of the Asquith children and their circle. For example, although Raymond Asquith has often been portrayed as a figure symbolic of the brilliant generation who lost their lives in the carnage of the First World War, Clifford shows how his hedonism and intellectual detachment may have meant he was just a little too aloof and not quite serious enough to achieve the brilliant career expected of him. In the summer of 1914 as the international crisis

over the Balkans was brewing, he was at the centre of a London Society scandal. At a party on a boat on the Thames he had offered Diana Manners (later to become Diana Cooper, wife of Duff Cooper) £10 to persuade a mutual friend to jump in the river. When both the friend and a member of the party who had tried to rescue him drowned, Raymond showed little remorse, and in what seemed like a cover-up avoided having to give evidence at the subsequent inquest.

The book also sheds light on the difficult relationship between Margot Asquith and her step-daughter Violet. Both wanted to be the centre of attention and tried to upstage the other. For example, Margot disapproved of Violet's 'deathbed betrothal' to Archie Gordon, after the latter's fatal injury in a car crash, as an excessive drama, but then made such an exaggerated display of grief at the funeral that she had to be comforted by, of all people, the dead man's mother.

Clifford gives a very vivid picture of society life before the First World War and of the

