

Biography

J. Graham Jones reviews the life and political career of Richard Livsey, Lord Livsey of Talgarth (1935–2010)

Richard Livsey and the pol



Richard Livsey, Lord Livsey of Talgarth (1935–2010)

IN THE 2003 Sir John Lloyd lecture to the Brecknock Society, entitled 'Brecknock at the Crossroads', Professor Aled Gruffudd Jones commented on the surprise election of Richard Livsey, the Liberal candidate, at the 1985 Brecon and Radnor by-election and said that it showed how Brecon stands in the middle of a political crossroads and has done so for a very long time.¹ He attributed this instability to the fact that inhabitants of the area moved between different social, political and cultural worlds, travelling from south to mid-Wales, from east to west, from the agricultural to the industrial, the rural to the urban, and from Welsh areas to predominantly English-speaking ones. An appreciation of these

underlying processes can provide some understanding of the way in which such a major political upset could occur.

In assessing Richard Livsey's engagement with his constituency, I have drawn on a very large collection of his political papers, some deriving from the family home and others held at his office at the House of Lords, which was recently presented by his widow to the custody of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales. Through them I seek to illustrate the way in which, despite the power of party machines, an individual politician can make a real difference and change the way in which a constituency is perceived.

This article was originally published in Volume 46 (2015) of *Brycheiniog*, the journal of the Brecknock Society & Museum Friends. The author would like to thank Dr John Gibbs, then acting editor of *Brycheiniog*, for his help in improving the structure of the article and for sourcing the illustrations. It is here republished with the kind permission of the Editorial Board of *Brycheiniog*.

itics of Brecon and Radnor

Richard Livsey's background and developing interest in the Brecon and Radnor constituency

Richard Arthur Lloyd Livsey was born at Talgarth, Breconshire, on 2 May 1935, the son of Arthur Norman Livsey, a master mariner of Brecon who also worked as a canal lock keeper, and Lilian Maisie (née James), a schoolteacher. His father died in Iraq in 1938 when Richard Livsey was just 3 years old, and consequently it was his widowed mother who had a great influence on his early development. He was educated at Talgarth County Primary School, Bedales School in Hampshire (a progressive independent school), Seale-Hayne Agricultural College, where he studied for a National Diploma in Agriculture, and later at Reading University, where he gained the degree of M.Sc. in agricultural management.

The young Richard Livsey began to take a keen interest in political life with the general election of July 1945, which he followed avidly in the Brecon and Radnor constituency: 'Breconshire was very political but was always split three ways between the three political parties'.² Set in the context of the twentieth century as a whole, this is a fair comment, but it should be noted that, having been taken by the Labour Party in 1939, the Brecon and Radnor division was held by that party for 40 years. Tudor Watkins, well regarded as a constituency MP, was the member from 1945 until 1970, beating the Conservatives into second place at every election despite the fluctuating fortunes of the two parties on the national scene.³

Richard Livsey was much influenced by several prominent Welsh Liberals – 'the Liberal political legends of the post-war period' – like Seaborne Davies, briefly the Liberal MP for the Carnarvon Boroughs (Lloyd George's old seat) in 1945, Roderic Bowen MP (Cardiganshire), Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris MP (Carmarthenshire), and Clement Davies MP (Montgomeryshire), who was also the Liberal Party leader from 1945 until 1956:

Davies spoke a lot around Wales about the need for a Welsh parliament and many other Liberal causes. Although he wasn't always that good a speaker, he could draw a substantial crowd. I recall one meeting in 1959 in Builth Wells in which we had over 300 people in attendance.

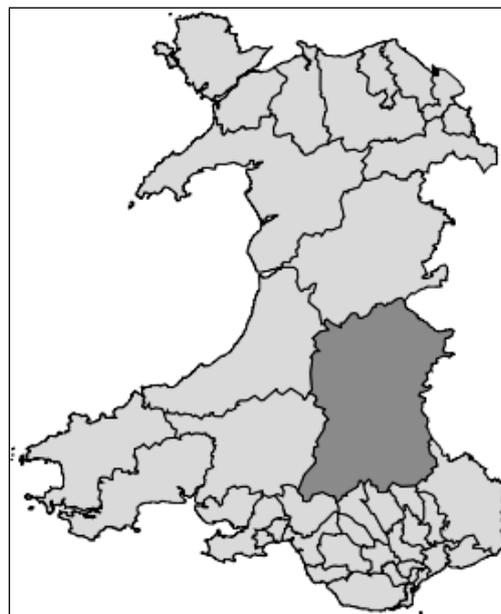
Davies was also a practical politician planning for the future. In this respect he selected Emlyn Hooson as his successor three years before his death. This helped Emlyn build up his profile in the seat and go on to win it in 1962.⁴

It was largely the influence of these men which made Livsey a committed Liberal and he joined the party in 1960. He was immediately asked to consider standing as the candidate for Brecon and Radnor, but the necessary resources were simply not available locally and, at 25 years of age, he also felt too inexperienced politically to stand for selection. Consequently no Liberal candidate stood in the constituency in 1964 as had also happened in 1959.

Richard Livsey enjoyed a varied life before eventually entering the House of Commons in July 1985 at the age of 50. In 1961 he moved to Galloway in Scotland to work for a year as an Assistant Farm Manager on one of the ICI company's farms; this was the period when he met Rene, his future wife. He was then transferred to Northumberland where he worked as ICI's agricultural development officer for the next five years. When Livsey left ICI, it was to return to Scotland to become Farm Manager of the Blair Drummond Estate in Perthshire where he was to remain for four enjoyable years. From 1971 until 1985, he was a senior lecturer in Farm Management at the Welsh Agricultural College (WAC), Llanbadarn Fawr, near Aberystwyth, initially under the leadership of Dr David Morris. Livsey played an important role in the setting up of the pioneering college and thereafter in providing a wide range of exciting and challenging academic courses. He and his wife also farmed some sixty acres of land at a smallholding at Llanon in Cardiganshire.

Despite being based in Scotland at the time, he played some part in the Liberal campaign in the Carmarthenshire by-election of July 1966 when, disappointingly for the party, the Liberal candidate D. Hywel Davies came a poor third, behind Plaid Cymru and the Labour Party: 'One, us Welsh Liberals felt we could have won. I think as Welsh Liberals this was probably our lowest point'.⁵ Livsey stood unsuccessfully as the party's candidate for Perth and East Perthshire in the general election of June 1970 (where he polled 3,000 votes, came fourth and lost his deposit in what

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had been a traditional Unionist seat), and he was then considered as a possible candidate in several Welsh divisions in the early 1970s. He was very conscious that, whereas Jo Grimond's leadership had led to something of a Liberal revival north of the border, Wales remained largely unaffected. Together with Geraint Howells, who had fought Brecon and Radnor in the 1970 general election, he argued for the reorganisation of the Liberal Party in Wales and for a clearer structure for policy formulation. Richard Livsey was one of a number of University and College staff at Aberystwyth during the early 1970s who much advanced the Liberal cause there; these included the scientists Dr Merfyn Jones and Professor H. K. King, and also George Morrison who was a member of the executive committee of the Welsh Liberal Party. In 1974 the Aberystwyth University Student Liberal Society, which had recently lapsed, was re-formed and soon attracted a substantial membership which much helped Geraint Howells to win the Ceredigion constituency from Labour in February of that year.

Pressed to stand for Denbighshire, Richard Livsey declined on the grounds of his then lack of proficiency in the Welsh language, understandably considered nigh on essential for selection in the constituency. Moreover, 'My real interest lies in Brecon and Radnor, I am a native of those parts and have strong connections there. I am sure if I got the opportunity, I could do well ... In the past my experience of Liberals in Breconshire is that they need quite a lot of badgering to be stung into action. However once that is done, quite a lot can be achieved'.⁶ Although the governing body of the Welsh Agricultural College did not in any way object to Livsey standing as a parliamentary candidate and was prepared to grant him leave of absence to conduct a general election campaign, by the end of 1973, with a general election likely to take place the following spring, he himself still felt unable to go ahead. Preparation for courses

at the college had proved unexpectedly arduous and time-consuming, his wife (who was expecting a child the following May) was increasingly unwell, and his personal financial situation at the time was 'a bit stretched'.⁷ In the event Dr Noel Thomas was chosen to contest Brecon and Radnor and polled a creditable 8,741 votes (19.4 per cent) in the February 1974 general election. The successful Labour candidate Caerwyn Roderick, who had taken over from Tudor Watkins in 1970, received 18,180 votes and the Conservative 15,903. By April it had become clear that yet another general election contest was likely before the end of the same year. Frustratingly both for him personally and for his party, Richard Livsey again felt unable to allow his name to go forward. As he wrote to Emlyn Hooson, the veteran MP for Montgomeryshire:

I continue to believe that a campaign of about three years' duration is needed to get into a winning position. In the meantime the initiative must not be lost. It could be that some members of the [Brecon and Radnor Liberal] Association may be reluctant to have a go again so soon after the last time, for reasons of cash etc. But I am sure you and Geraint [Howells] will persuade them otherwise, if they need such persuasion. Again it is a pity I cannot stand, particularly in view of the current situation in livestock farming, especially beef. This is – politically – one of the most frustrating years I have had to suffer. My ambitions will have to remain temporarily submerged.⁸

Eventually, in the 1979 general election, Richard Livsey did stand as a parliamentary candidate, and this, somewhat surprisingly, in the Labour/Conservative marginal constituency of Pembrokeshire. On his adoption there in November 1977, Emlyn Hooson wrote privately to the chairman of the Pembrokeshire Liberal Association, 'Mr.

Left: Livsey after the by-election

Above: Wales and the Brecon & Radnor constituency (Wereon – own work, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4459706_)

Livsey has been active within the Welsh Liberal Party for some considerable time, both as a candidate and in other spheres, and has proved himself to be a person of outstanding ability and dedication. ... With the solid base of support which has already been built up in Pembrokeshire, I feel sure that Liberalism in the constituency will now go from strength to strength'.¹⁰ This certainly proved a wholly forlorn hope! In the dramatic swing to the right that brought Margaret Thatcher into Downing Street in May 1979, support ebbed away from the Liberals as well as from the Labour. Emlyn Hooson lost his seat in Montgomeryshire, and Livsey saw the Liberal vote in Pembrokeshire fall by a third. In Brecon and Radnor the drop in the Liberal vote was on a similar scale. Here Tom Hooson the Conservative aspirant (and a first cousin to Emlyn Hooson) defeated Caerwyn Roderick, converting a Labour majority of 3000 into a Conservative one of the same magnitude.

Livsey as a significant member of the Liberal Party outside Westminster

By the late 1970s Richard Livsey had emerged as a highly respected figure within the Liberal Party in Wales and had lent his support to the formation and continuation of the 'Lib-Lab' pact formed with Callaghan's Labour administration in March 1977: the only official bi-party agreement in Britain since the Second World War – until the formation of the coalition government of Conservatives and Liberals in 2010. At a special conference convened by the party at Blackpool on 21 January 1978, Richard Livsey threw his weight unequivocally behind the continuation of the innovative pact between the two parties: 'The easy path to take would be to scrap the Pact now and throw away all the advantages we have gained and leave no chance of further gains in the future. But I think we are only just over half way through and this is the time to keep our nerve and support David Steel. The skipper and crew should not abandon ship halfway through the voyage'.¹¹ A belief in devolution was integral to Livsey's political philosophy, and, predictably, he wholeheartedly supported the first devolution referendum convened by the Labour government on St David's Day 1979 seeking to establish a national assembly for Wales, potentially a major step forward.¹²

In the same speech in which he spoken up for the Lib Lab pact, Livsey continued:

As regards devolution it is essential that we see the Welsh devolution Bill through Parliament. The Welsh Liberal Party have been fighting for increased autonomy for Wales since the days of Lloyd George at the end of the last century. Now that our ideals are at last coming to fruition it is not the time to pull out and prevent a Welsh Assembly being set up. The Welsh nationalists are now opposing the Wales Bill on the grounds

that it will ultimately lead to a federal system of government throughout Britain. That's just what we want. The issue must be settled now – there will be no chance under the Tories. If we support the Pact today we will be half way to letting the Welsh Liberal Party realise the aspirations of the Welsh people. What is good for the Liberal party is good for Wales and is good for Britain. *Anwyl gyfeillion* [dear friends], fellow Liberals, don't hesitate now. Our vote here today can show the way ahead for radical politics in Britain. We must have the courage of our convictions and carry on with our courageous experiment in modern government.¹³

The overwhelming 'No' vote in the Referendum of 1 March 1979 left Livsey highly dejected, 'In hindsight I felt that it was the wrong time for a referendum. It was simply used as a way of voting against an unpopular Labour government and Tories milked this fully'.¹⁴

Another highly significant event of this era was the breaking away from Labour in 1981 of 'The Gang of Four' and its followers, and the subsequent formation of the Social Democratic Party (the SDP). Interviewed in 2003, Livsey recalled his initial feelings towards the new party.

The SDP were a totally different type of people [from the Liberals]. Some were quite aggressive; others were quite friendly; many had absolutely no experience of politics at all. What they did give us was an important new impetus. This was because many were active in the world of business and they also had a large membership on the ground in the south-Wales urban constituencies which we hadn't been in for decades. They were also well up in publishing, printing and campaigning techniques, which the Liberals in Wales often lacked. The balance of members in rural seats, however, still remained predominantly Liberal. In Brecon and Radnorshire, for example, I recall there were 150 Liberal members and twenty-seven SDP.¹⁵

Richard Livsey first contested Brecon and Radnor in 1983 as the Liberal-SDP Alliance aspirant, when he came third. However, he succeeded in more than doubling the previous Liberal vote in the constituency – from 4,654 in 1979 to 9,226 in 1983. The Conservative Tom Hooson won again, and the Labour Party vote was nigh on halved. In the recent redrawing of the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies, the division had lost some 12,000 constituents in the Brynmawr and Cefn Coed area of Breconshire, that southern strip at the top of the mining valleys. In consequence, political pundits ventured the opinion that the Labour Party stood no prospect of recapturing a division which comprised Brecon, Llan-drindod Wells, a number of smaller towns and hundreds of rural villages. It contained one of the largest farming votes in the whole of the United

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Kingdom, fully 17 per cent of the local workforce.¹⁶ At this time no more than a small proportion of the farming community within the constituency was committed to voting for the Labour Party. Only one corner of the constituency remained safe for Labour – the area surrounding the still sizeable town of Ystradgynlais where there remained a massive Miners' Welfare Hall, a fissured monument by the 1980s to the age-old Socialist tradition of self-improvement and self-reliance. During the course of the 1983 general election campaign, Richard Livsey told the electors of the substantially revised constituency:

In Brecon and Radnor the situation is now far worse than at any time since I was growing up in Talgarth. I love this constituency and its people, but like so many before and since, I was forced to move away to find work. I know what it is like to long to come back to one's homeland, and the frustration of being unable to do so through lack of opportunity. The scourge of unemployment amongst our young people, and middle aged family people is totally unacceptable. Through Government policies our education, transport and social services have been cut to the bone. Powys has lost its intermediate area development status and that has cut us off from a lot of European and other aid, yet our people are some of the lowest paid in Britain.

... Do not be put off at this election by negative stories of the Alliance letting Labour or the Tories in. Due to Boundary changes in the constituency, 12,000 electors have left us in Brynmawr and Cefn Coed. The political map of Brecon and Radnor has totally changed. This is a new and great opportunity for you to cast aside the old politics. Be positive and vote for the Liberal Alliance.¹⁷

The 1985 by-election

On 4 July 1985 Richard Livsey finally entered the House of Commons as the Liberal MP, with the slim majority of 559 votes over the Labour candidate, at a high-profile by-election held on the death of Tom Hooson. The by-election was one of the most notable electoral successes of the SDP–Liberal Alliance. It was the first Liberal gain in Wales since Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris's largely unexpected capture of Carmarthen and the first Liberal by-election victory in a Welsh constituency since 1923. A Liberal had not represented Brecon and Radnor since the 1924 election when the sitting MP William Jenkins was defeated by the Unionist Walter Hall. As indicated earlier, in many of the intervening campaigns the party had been unable even to field a candidate.

Tom Hooson had suffered from ill health for a considerable period. Although viewed as something of a loner at the House of Commons, he had earned deep respect within Brecon and Radnor as

a conscientious, committed, hard-working constituency MP. Indeed, he was still working, signing letters to his constituents, only hours before he died: the victim of incurable cancer. Tom Hooson's majority of 3,027 votes in 1979 (6.3 per cent) had surged to 8784 votes (23.2 per cent) by June 1983. In any general election, such was his local standing and personal vote, the seat seemed pretty safe for the Conservatives. But a mid-term by-election, when a government is inevitably unpopular to some extent, was a wholly different proposition.

On 26 May 1985 Richard Livsey was formally selected as the prospective Alliance candidate. His old friend and political associate Geraint Howells, having known of Tom Hooson's terminal illness, had tipped off Livsey as to the likelihood of a by-election, thus enabling him to redouble his efforts on the ground. Ever since the 1983 general election, Livsey had been nursing the constituency and had spared no effort to revitalise the local party organisation. An additional advantage was that Andrew Ellis, the president of the Liberal Party nationally at this time and twice its general election candidate at Newcastle-upon-Tyne Central, now became Livsey's election agent. Other fortuitous factors had intervened too. The Revd D. R. Morris, the Labour candidate in the 1983 general election, was now sitting in the European Parliament at Brussels, while his successor as candidate at Brecon and Radnor, the academic Dr Richard Willey, had spent but little time in the constituency. Labour Party morale was conspicuously low at this time as the party nationally was dogged by severe internal disputes, during the leaderships of Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock, while the legacy of the miners' strike of 1984–85 remained fresh in the minds of the electorate. Brecon and Radnor did not even appear on the published list of the Labour Party's 130 top target seats at this time. Another factor was that the Conservative aspirant Dr Chris Butler also had no local links with the division and was given only a few weeks to campaign on the ground. Ironically, the wish of the local Conservative Association to have the by-election in September or October had been thwarted by the decision of the Conservative administration to move the writ on 10 June 1985 for the by-election to be held on 4 July.¹⁸

The famous (some might say 'notorious') Liberal by-election machine swung powerfully into action during the frenzied campaign, with party activists flooding in from all over the country, not a few of whom got totally lost trying to find the addresses of isolated voters. Prominent heavyweights from all the political parties began to arrive there in increasing numbers. Brecon and Radnor was the largest and the most rural constituency in the whole of Wales, and the one with the highest numbers of sheep anywhere in the UK! As described in the introduction to this article, the elongated constituency was also one of great contrasts, stretching from the sparsely populated

Left, from top:

Newspaper headline 6 July 1985, after Brecon & Radnor by-election.

Livsey with Paul Tyler at a local market (photo: Brecon & Radnor Liberal Democrats).

Livsey at a British Field Sports Society event (photo: Brecon & Radnor Liberal Democrats).

uplands in the north to the once heavily industrialised town of Ystradgynlais in the south, from the borders of Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire in the west over to the English borders in the east.¹⁹ At the height of the keenly observed by-election campaign, *The Times* reported:

Brecon and Radnor is as near to being uninhabited territory as any tract of land that hopeful candidates ever went foraging into. Voters are amongst the rarest forms of livestock among its mottled mountains. If a rare human figure does plod into view, to be surrounded instantly by candidates eager to show off their command of EEC sheepmeat regulations and reporters intent on testing the mood of the nation, it is ten to one that he proves to be a backpacker from Birmingham. After a few rebuffs one begins to suspect that this is a form of protective colouring adopted by the locals: they will have increasing need of it in the weeks ahead.

Campaigning here is less a matter of door-stepping than of orienteering, and if the candidates all muster for the count without losing their way in the up-country lanes, they will have done well. The constituency is the largest in area in England and Wales, with only 48,000 voters scattered across wide-open acres of delectable landscape. Almost half the constituency lies higher than the 1,000 feet said to denote a mountain. The electoral statistics place Brecon and Radnor securely among the 50 prettiest seats in the House, and by moving the writ for a July 4 vote the Government's political managers have given a host of political commentators an excuse for excursions into Mid-Wales while the hawthorn and cow-parsley are still at their best.²⁰

At the core of Livsey's campaign was a call for novel approaches to tackle the interrelated thorny problems of unemployment and rural depopulation. He called for local assistance for locally based firms, a greater flexibility on the part of the Mid-Wales Development Corporation to generate new jobs, assistance for people wishing to set up new businesses, and a revitalisation of the local economy. He maintained that the political complacency identified by commentators could be attributed to the fact that scarcity of work locally meant that the division had fewer young people than most seats and more pensioners. In the words of the *Daily Mail*, 'Out around the sheep pens, and beside the mud-spattered land-rovers, the Alliance candidate, smallholder sheep farmer Richard Livsey blends more naturally with the local landscape than the others. And the word of mouth goes that he is "all right". If constituencies need MPs who fit their profile, then the quiet spoken Mr. Livsey is probably the man for Brecon and Radnor'.²² The record of the Conservative government on unemployment was generally unimpressive, there was an announcement that some £175 million was to be cut from the funding



Richard Livsey and the politics of Brecon and Radnor

available for the payment of child benefit, and the personal popularity of Margaret Thatcher had dropped significantly since the heady days of the Falklands War in the spring of 1982 and the ensuing June 1983 general election campaign.

But, during the second week of the by-election campaign, the air at Brecon and Radnor was allegedly 'filled with innuendos, slurs and smears' when the Livsey campaign team distributed their second leaflet asserting that not only was their candidate a family man, but that he was also 'the only major party candidate with a secure family background':

Most people feel Brecon and Radnor deserves a local M.P., in touch with local opinions, able to really represent local needs and interests. Richard Livsey could do that. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, 'He is the last authentic local candidate'. Richard is the only major party candidate in this election with a secure family background, and that's important. Richard knows how important the values and traditions of family life are. This area is Richard's home and he shares our own deep pride and love for mid-Wales. Our concerns are his concerns and, with his many local contacts and interests, Richard could be relied upon to continue our long-standing tradition of independent and fair-minded representation in Parliament.²³

This was an unpleasant reflection on the Conservative contender Chris Butler who, at 34 years of age, was still single, and more particularly on the Labour candidate Dr Richard Willey who had lived with his 'common law wife' Celia for sixteen years without going through a formal marriage ceremony. Chris Butler declared at his next press conference that he was indeed 'deeply offended' by the leaflet, 'A man who started out being Mr Nice has become Mr Nasty. I would like an apology for that remark'. Initially, Richard Livsey declared in response that his Conservative opponent had become 'over-sensitive' to the implications of the leaflet, but soon felt obliged to issue 'an unreserved apology', asserting that he himself had not, in fact, approved the content of the leaflet which was the work of 'the hardened backroom boys of the Liberal Party'. But by this time the offensive literature had found its way into every home in the constituency and, although later withdrawn, it would inevitably make an impact.²⁴ Personal attacks had begun to dominate the local campaign – at least according to the media. *The Guardian* reported that, on the following Saturday, Nicholas Edwards, the Secretary of State for Wales, had told delegates at the Welsh Conservative Party conference at Llandudno that the opposition candidates in the by-election had been behaving like 'a mixture of the mafia and the mentally handicapped'.²⁵ According to the *Liberal News*, the Conservatives saw Richard Livsey as 'a loser, a split choice, a ditherer, an

opportunist, a political nomad and not his own man'.²⁶ Other views were, however, more sympathetic. During the course of the campaign it had been suggested to those on the left wing of Plaid Cymru that, as it was such a close campaign, the party should not put up its own candidate, and rather lend support to the Labour aspirant Dr Richard Willey. Party leader Dafydd Wigley responded that it would be more fitting to throw their weight behind Richard Livsey.²⁷

In the aftermath of the striking by-election victory, *The Times* political correspondent wrote of the newly elected MP, 'He is not a man of outward brilliance, and as a public speaker he is flat and a little diffident. But he has a real warmth, especially in face-to-face contacts, and he has the advantage over his main rivals of looking like a man mature and at home in the workaday world, slow-spoken and reassuring and not like a product of some rarefied political environment'.²⁸ In the House of Commons Livsey became one of a group of three Welsh Liberal MPs: the others being Geraint Howells (Ceredigion) and Alex Carlile who had recaptured Montgomeryshire from the Conservatives in 1983. After the result had been declared, Carlile had told the euphoric audience, 'With the three constituencies of Ceredigion, Montgomery, and Brecon and Radnor, the Liberals now represent between 1.5 and 2 million acres of Wales'. On the same occasion the agent Andrew Ellis claimed a new principle of proportional representation 'Liberals now represent more land area in the UK than the entire Labour Party'.²⁹

Richard Livsey's success was widely claimed to be 'a rebirth of Liberalism in Wales',³⁰ and his victory was of much significance to his reviving a party which now had eighteen MPs sitting in the House of Commons and, for the first time since 1956, three MPs from Wales. The experience of campaigning together during the hard fought by-election campaign had also proved highly beneficial in cementing the bonds between the two Alliance parties in Wales.

A parliamentary career: ups and downs in a marginal seat

As Livsey took the oath of allegiance on assuming his seat in the Commons, the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher congratulated the new MP, but ventured the opinion that 'he might well not be around for long'. Party loyalists, however, staked their hopes on the fact that six of the Liberal victors in by-elections during the previous twenty years were still at Westminster: David Steel, Cyril Smith, Clement Freud, Alan Beith, David Alton and Simon Hughes.³¹ Richard Livsey was immediately rewarded at Westminster with his party's agriculture portfolio and attacked the Thatcher government over the rapidly declining fortunes of agriculture in Wales. During an Opposition day in the House of Commons the

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following February, he chastised the government for its ineffectual record on farming, 'I have been in the industry thirty years and have never seen such a time when the industry shows such a lack of confidence'.³² His rhetoric drew attention to the severe problems faced by the Welsh farming communities, and also hardened the resolve of the Conservatives to re-capture the constituency at the first available opportunity.³³

Richard Livsey was re-elected at Brecon and Radnor in the 1987 general election, but now with an even slimmer majority, determined after several recounts, of just fifty-six votes, and on this occasion over the Conservatives. Now he campaigned on his record as an excellent constituency MP and on the slogan 'Everybody knows somebody who has been helped by Richard Livsey'.³⁴ In this general election campaign, he was given responsibility for his party's countryside portfolio, while Geraint Howells assumed responsibility for 'Wales' and Alex Carlile for legal affairs.³⁵ In spite of their nationwide portfolios, the three Welsh Liberal MPs did most of their election campaigning within Wales, publicising the Welsh manifesto of the Alliance parties entitled *Wales, the Way Forward: the Time has Come* and immensely proud that an Alliance candidate was now able to stand in every single Welsh constituency. In a moving tribute to Livsey at the Lloyd George weekend school held at Llandrindod Wells in February 2011, his energetic local agent in 1987, Celia Thomas (subsequently Baroness) recalled:

Two years later [i.e. in 1987], the General Election presented a formidable challenge. The by-election unit had gone, and I was asked to be his agent – a most daunting task. I discovered that he was a very popular and well-loved MP who knew every inch of his vast constituency and many of his constituents personally, for whom he worked his socks off. But nothing was simple. Before we mapped out his itinerary, he said, in his rather mournful voice: 'Celia, there's something you ought to know about me.' My heart sank. But he went on: 'I just can't live on sandwiches for lunch.' Phew, what a relief – and so a pub lunch was factored in each day. But his next instruction was more than a little frustrating. He believed that he must be seen in the north and south of his constituency every day, which meant that he spent a huge amount of time on the road. He was also determined to hold meetings in every village and town, enjoying the challenge of the occasional difficult question from one or two keen to catch him out.³⁶

Brecon and Radnor had now become one of the most marginal seats in the whole of the United Kingdom. On his return to parliament, Richard Livsey was at once appointed the Liberal Democrat's new Welsh leader and the party's Shadow Secretary of State for Wales, a popular choice, although there were some former SDP members

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who grumbled at the apparent dominance of the Liberals within the merged party. He served as Liberal Party spokesman on agriculture, 1985–87, and as Alliance spokesman on agriculture and the countryside and on Welsh Affairs, 1987–92. He also served as the leader of the Welsh Liberal Democrats and Party Spokesman on Wales from 1988 until 1992. In addition, he was a member of the Welsh Select Affairs Committee. Following poor Liberal Democrat by-election results in Wales and elsewhere in the UK during 1988, there was a debate on a new name for the united party some pressing for the total deletion of the word 'Liberal' from its title.³⁷ Livsey joined forces with Geraint Howells and Alex Carlile in advocating that the party should become known as the 'Liberal Democrats' and the party in Wales as the 'Welsh Liberal Democrats', changes eventually approved by a ballot of all party members in the UK in October 1989. Richard Livsey was the only prominent Welsh Liberal to come out strongly in support of the election of Paddy Ashdown (who conspicuously lacked popular support in Wales), rather than Alan Beith, as the leader of the new party as successor to David Steel in July 1988:

I was a close friend of Alan Beith, but I still believed that Ashdown had greater potential. He was a different kind of leader. [David] Steel had got involved in Wales during election times; his helicopter tours to Ceredigion during election time were very useful. Ashdown was much more active within Wales, though. There was a large Liberal faction in favour of Beith within Wales, as he was seen as a traditional Liberal. Ashdown's disciplined lifestyle, however, had made him a greater political force. Therefore I got involved in Ashdown's campaign from the very start. During the campaign we met in his flat in London every morning. Thankfully, although the first few years were not that fruitful, Ashdown's leadership provided us with some of our greatest post-war successes.³⁸

Having contributed to the up-hill Alliance by-election campaigns at Pontypridd and the Vale of Glamorgan in 1989, Richard Livsey also participated actively in the lively Monmouth by-election campaign of May 1991, helping to bring about a creditable vote of 11,164 (24.8 per cent) for the Liberal candidate Frances David – 'an excellent candidate and a seasoned campaigner'³⁹ – in a division which bordered on Brecon and Radnor and gave the party in Wales a major boost. He reflected, 'People were fed up with the Tories at this time and they came across to us in droves. This was a much more rural seat like those we held in mid-Wales and we felt at home there. Frances's vote reflected this fact'.⁴⁰ As the next general election campaign inevitably loomed, the MP for Brecon and Radnor spared no effort to bring his constituency's many problems to the attention of the House of Commons.

Richard Livsey and the politics of Brecon and Radnor

In the 1992 general election Livsey was narrowly defeated by Conservative Jonathan Evans by the agonisingly tiny margin of only 130 votes, although Livsey's personal vote had actually increased by 1,338. Celia Thomas has again recalled the course of events:

Then came the next General Election and once more I was asked to be his agent. This time the hunting issue was very much to the fore, and Richard was in a dilemma, which is when I saw the stubborn side of his character. I urged him to make his position clear, but he declined, saying that although he had nine hunts in his constituency, he had actually received more letters against hunting, mainly from the Ystradgynlais area, and didn't want to inflame passions. Besides, he thought, quite understandably, that there were far more pressing issues to speak about, such as the real poverty in much of the rural economy. But Brecon & Radnor was targeted by the British Field Sports Society, who characterised his position as being anti-fox hunting, and Richard lost the seat by just 130 votes – perhaps the only constituency in the country where hunting may have made a difference⁴¹

The issue of hunting came in an election, won by the Conservatives, where the Liberal Democrats showed a decline and the Labour party advanced. Richard Livsey later reflected on his loss of the seat: 'I had always been pro-hunting but this didn't become evident enough in the campaign and it cost me the vital votes I needed to keep the seat. Also, during the campaign I put too much time in as the Welsh party leader in other constituencies. This was at the expense of my own constituency and my support there suffered'.⁴²

While outside the House of Commons, Richard Livsey faced a period of unemployment, and then served as the deputy director and subsequently the development manager for ATB-Landbase Cymru from 1993 until 1997. Then, in the 1997 general election, following a dynamic local campaign based on support for public services, small businesses and farms. Livsey was able to recapture the seat by the impressively wide margin of more than 5,000 votes to become one of a solid cohort of forty-six Liberal Democrat MPs in the new parliament. This was the general election in which 'New Labour' came to power under the leadership of Tony Blair with a landslide majority in the House of Commons. Nationally, there was little overall change in the percentage of votes cast for the Liberal Democrats, but tactical voting was a significant factor in certain constituencies.⁴³ This was well illustrated in Brecon and Radnor where every single leaflet circulated by the Liberal Democrats was emphatic that 'only Richard Livsey can defeat the Tories'. In addition, the local campaign team's performance was second to none, their efforts buttressed still further by canvassers from neighbouring constituencies.

'Both the Welsh and the Federal (National) Liberal party targeted the seat, which gave us a lot of resources there. We were also able to do a private opinion poll in the seat which meant that we could target the messages we needed to win'.⁴⁴ In the process he had the satisfaction of ousting the sole remaining Conservative MP in Wales, Jonathan Evans. As Brecon and Radnor was the last Welsh constituency to declare in 1997, the re-elected MP rejoiced in his key role in creating within Wales 'a Tory-free zone' for the first time ever since the Liberal landslide victory of 1906.⁴⁵ No longer was the Brecon and Radnor division transparently marginal! Immediately following his re-election, Richard Livsey was appointed a member of the Welsh Affairs Select Committee and of the Constitution Reform Strategy Committee. He was also his party's spokesman for Wales.

Service in the Upper House and support for devolution

In March 2000, stubbornly unwilling to continue as an MP into his seventies, Richard Livsey announced his intention of retiring from the House of Commons at the next general election. He was undoubtedly also keenly aware of the resurgence of the Conservatives within his constituency and felt that a younger candidate was required. He thus left parliament at the general election of 2001 and, on the recommendation of Charles Kennedy, immediately entered the House of Lords as Baron Livsey of Talgarth. In the Upper House, he became his party's spokesman on agriculture and countryside affairs, was made a member of the European Environment and Rural Affairs Committee and became president of the EU Movement in Wales. From the House of Lords he campaigned vigorously for registered hunting, rather than a hunting ban, being now released from his earlier caution. The House of Lords always warms to experts, and Richard Livsey's impressive knowledge on all matters to do with farming, the countryside, the rural economy and Wales, was much appreciated in the less combative atmosphere of the Upper House.

Livsey's support for the 'Yes' campaign during the 1979 referendum on a Welsh Assembly has already been described, and his enthusiasm for devolution remained undimmed. On one occasion, when the Speaker of the House of Commons had failed to call a single Opposition MP from Wales to speak in a debate on devolution, Richard Livsey was unrestrained in his indignation, 'As a Welshman, I am used to being treated with contempt, but I would not have expected my nation to be disgraced in this way in this House'.⁴⁶ He continued thereafter to be central to the pro-devolution cause and was the leader of the Liberal Democrat campaign in the narrowly successful Welsh devolution referendum in 1997, certainly contributing to raising the 'Yes'

'Brecon & Radnor was targeted by the British Field Sports Society, who characterised his position as being anti-fox hunting, and Richard lost the seat by just 130 votes – perhaps the only constituency in the country where hunting may have made a difference.'

vote within largely intransigent Powys, which had polled a most substantial 'No' vote in 1979. Richard Livsey worked amicably for the cause of devolution with leading figures from the other political parties in Wales including Peter Hain, Ron Davies, Dafydd Wigley and Ieuan Wyn Jones. He and Mike German were by far the most frequently broadcast 'media faces' of the Welsh Liberal Democrats during the campaign. Livsey rather dramatically took to the stage at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama at Cardiff alongside Ron Davies, the then Labour Welsh Secretary of State, Dafydd Wigley, Plaid Cymru leader, and the other campaign leaders as the extremely narrow result in favour of devolution was announced. As he left the count, Livsey was mobbed by groups of zealous teenagers revelling in the outcome. Recalling the campaign in an interview with the *Western Mail* in 2009, he said: 'We had the right people in the right place at the right time. We were all working for the same objective and we knew where we were going. If other personalities had been involved, a different mix of people, it could have been diabolical'.⁴⁷

Assessments and conclusions

Richard Livsey was a man of honour and decency who was loved and respected by his constituents, colleagues and by politicians of all parties. One scribe complained that Livsey's 'melancholy drone' left him with a strong desire to emigrate. But what he lacked as an orator, he made up for in hard work and a kindly, gentlemanly air which won him firm friends across the political spectrum. He will be remembered particularly as a champion for the rural communities in which he lived and as an expert on agriculture. Despite this, for someone used to running farms, Richard Livsey could be surprisingly impractical at times! During one election campaign, while on a visit to Margam college, south Wales, his car suffered a flat tyre and he had to appeal helplessly for someone to change the wheel.⁴⁸ Such incidents were commonplace during successive campaigns.

As well as being a central figure in Welsh Liberal politics over a thirty-year period, Livsey's main success was to build Brecon and Radnor into a relative stronghold for the Liberal Democrats. But he had his failures as well. During his period as leader of the Welsh Liberal Party, the party never took off electorally, and the Liberal success in the Brecon and Radnor division was not exported to neighbouring Welsh constituencies. He did not do 'a Grimond for Wales'.

Although he had enjoyed robust health for most of his life, Richard Livsey died unexpectedly in his sleep on 15 September 2010 at his home at Llanfihangel Tal-y-Llyn near Brecon, at the relatively early age of 75 years. Among the hundreds of mourners who attended the funeral service held at St Gwendoline's church, Talgarth eleven days later, were Simon Hughes,

the Deputy Lib Dem leader, Lord (Roger) Roberts of Llandudno, who delivered the moving eulogy, and Kirsty Williams, the AM for Brecon and Radnorshire and the Welsh Liberal Democrats leader – eloquent testimony to the respect in which Livsey was held by all generations within his party. On hearing of his death, Glyn Davies, by then the Conservative MP for Montgomeryshire, paid tribute, 'Sad to learn that Lord Richard Livsey has died. Like most people who knew Richard, I liked him. He was a very good friend to Mid Wales in particular, to agriculture and to the cause of devolution ... Always thought he had a wonderful feel for his constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire'.⁴⁹ Vaughan Roderic, the BBC Wales political affairs correspondent, spelled out Livsey's accomplishments: 'His great achievement was to make us think of Powys as being the Liberal heartland, because it wasn't before Richard Livsey. Montgomeryshire was, Brecon and Radnorshire wasn't'.⁵⁰ This was quite remarkable in a division in which the Liberal cause had been moribund for decades and testimony to the contribution that a single individual can make – and this without great histrionic ability but through an engaging personality and a devotion to duty.

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- 1 A. G. Jones, 'Brecknock at the Crossroads – journalism, history and cultural identity in nineteenth-century Wales', *Brycheiniog*, vol. 35 (2003), pp. 101–16.
- 2 R. Deacon, 'Richard Livsey', *Journal of Liberal History*, 81 (Winter 2013–14), p. 37. This extensive interview took place in March 2003 as part of Professor Deacon's ambitious research programme on the history of the Liberal Party in Wales.
- 3 See J. G. Jones, 'Watkins, Tudor Elwyn, Baron Watkins of Glantawe, (1903–1983)', *Dictionary of Welsh Biography on-line*, accessed 17 Dec. 2014. It is of some interest to note that Tudor Watkins was one of the very few Labour MPs from Wales from this era who was consistently loyal to the cause of devolution – wholly contrary to Labour Party directives.
- 4 Deacon, 'Richard Livsey', p. 38.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 National Library of Wales [hereafter NLW], Emlyn Hooson Papers, box 44, Richard Livsey to Rhys Geran Lloyd, 31 Dec. 1972, marked by RGL, 'Dear Emlyn [Hooson], Urgent, Can you please stir this up urgently[?] Richard fought in Scotland last time'. See also *ibid.*, Sir Russell Johnston MP to Emlyn Hooson, 23 Feb. 1973, 'I think he [Richard Livsey] would be an excellent candidate and we were very sorry to lose him from Scotland'.
- 7 *Ibid.*, Vivian Roberts, Acting Principal of the Welsh Agricultural College, Llanbadarn Fawr, Aberystwyth,

Richard Livsey was a man of honour and decency who was loved and respected by his constituents, colleagues and by politicians of all parties.

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- to Emlyn Hooson, 10 Dec. 1973; *ibid.*, Richard Livsey to Hooson, 4 Dec. 1973.
- 8 *Ibid.*, Livsey to Hooson, 23 Apr. 1974.
- 9 It would seem that the Pembrokeshire Liberal Association had already adopted Richard Livsey as its candidate long before candidate selection was considered by the constituency party in Brecon and Radnor.
- 10 NLW, Emlyn Hooson Papers, box 44, Emlyn Hooson to W. C. Philpin, chairman of the Pembrokeshire Liberal Association, 24 Nov. 1977 (copy).
- 11 NLW, Merfyn Jones Papers, file 83, press release issued by the Pembrokeshire Liberal Association, 21 Jan. 1978.
- 12 The Welsh referendum of 1979 was a post-legislative referendum held on 1 Mar. 1979 (St David's Day) to decide whether there was sufficient support for a Welsh Assembly among the Welsh electorate. The referendum was held under the terms of the Wales Act 1978 drawn up to implement proposals made by the Kilbrandon Report published in 1973.
- 13 NLW, Merfyn Jones Papers, file 83, press release issued by the Pembrokeshire Liberal Association, 21 Jan. 1978.
- 14 Deacon, 'Richard Livsey', p. 38.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 16 Compared with less than 3 per cent of the population of the United Kingdom.
- 17 NLW, Merfyn Jones Papers, file 83, election leaflet of Richard Livsey, June 1983 general election.
- 18 See R. Deacon, *The Welsh Liberals: the History of the Liberal and Liberal Democratic Parties in Wales* (Cardiff, 2014), pp. 218–19.
- 19 See Richard Livsey's election address, June 1985.
- 20 George Hill, 'Looking for votes over hill and under dale', *The Times*, 15 Jun. 1985, p. 10.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 NLW, Welsh Political Ephemera Collection, election leaflet in file BB/5, citing a recent column from the *Daily Mail*.
- 23 NLW, Gwyn Griffiths Papers, file 50, by-election leaflet of Richard Livsey, June 1985.
- 24 'Liberals provoke family feud', *The Guardian*, 25 Jun. 1985.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Liberal News*, 12 Jul. 1985, pp. 6–7.
- 27 Dafydd Wigley, 'Ysgrif goffa: Richard Livsey (1935–2010)', *Barn*, no. 574 (Nov. 2010), p. 30.
- 28 'Winning style of friendly neighbourhood farmer', *The Times*, 6 Jul. 1985, p. 2.
- 29 'Marginal fight gives Brecon last laugh', *The Guardian*, 6 Jul. 1985.
- 30 Kirsty Williams, leader of the Liberal Democrats in Wales, in the *Western Mail*, 18 Sep. 2010.
- 31 David McKie, 'The new boy and the old lags', *The Guardian*, 10 Jul. 1985.
- 32 *Liberal News*, 21 Feb. 1986.
- 33 Deacon, *The Welsh Liberals*, p. 221.
- 34 NLW, Welsh Political Ephemera Collection, leaflet in file BA3/4 (general election 1987).
- 35 *Welsh Liberal Party Campaign Bulletin*, no. 17, Feb. 1987.
- 36 Baroness Celia Thomas, 'Tribute to Richard Livsey', 25 Feb. 2011, Lloyd George Society website, consulted 21 Dec. 2011.
- 37 The Liberal–SDP 'Alliance' in fact came to an end in 1988 when they merged into the Liberal Democratic Party which still exists today.
- 38 Deacon, 'Richard Livsey', p. 40.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Tactical voting frequently occurs in elections with more than two candidates, when a voter supports a candidate other than his or her *sincere preference* in order to prevent what he thinks may be an undesirable outcome.
- 44 Deacon, 'Richard Livsey', p. 40.
- 45 Wigley, 'Richard Livsey', p. 30.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 *Western Mail*, 18 Sep. 2010.
- 48 Noted in Livsey's obituary in *The Guardian*, 19 Sep. 2010.
- 49 Website, 'A view from rural Wales: Welsh politics and countryside', consulted 20 Dec. 2011.
- 50 Cited in Deacon, *The Welsh Liberals*, p. 303.

Letters to the Editor

Reforming the Lords

Professor Robert Hazell's account of the coalition's failure to reform the House of Lords (*Journal of Liberal History* 92, autumn 2016) seems rather rough when he blames Nick Clegg's 'lack of detailed knowledge, aggravated by his failure to appoint any expert advisers' but is unwittingly endorsed when one of his inexpert advisers, Matthew Hanney, protests at the sentiment!

My complaint is that they also lacked knowledge of the history of the party on the subject. Mr Asquith promised a 'popular' chamber to replace the hereditary one. He appointed the Bryce Commission to come up with proposals and they suggested election by the House of Commons, but the First World War intervened.

In my first election as leader in 1979, our manifesto stated: 'The House of Lords should be replaced by a new, democratically chosen, second chamber which includes representatives of the nations and regions of the UK, and UK Members of the European Parliament'. And in the 1987 election, jointly with David Owen, our Alliance manifesto pledged: 'a reform of the second chamber linked with our devolution proposals so that it will include members elected from the nations and regions of Britain'.

These were both overlooked in favour of the simplistic 15-year general election which, as Hazell rightly points out, never had a chance of being approved by any House of Commons. (The Bryce Commission itself had 'forcibly argued

that a Chamber elected on the same franchise as the Commons would inevitably become a rival'.)

Setting aside the doomed coalition efforts the party should now, post-Brexit, be advocating our long-standing commitment to a federal UK, enabling not just the Commons but the other legislatures to elect a wholly new democratic senate as the federal chamber of our parliament.

By the way, even David Cameron was moved in a press conference in Singapore – of all places – to acknowledge 'the passing of the Steel Bill' as at least enabling peers to retire and to expel crooks; pending fundamental reform, such minor steps are fully justified and will continue.

David Steel