

Biography

Dr J. Graham Jones examines the life and political career of Geraint Howells, the Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd (1925–2004)

Lord Geraint



of Ponterwyd

GERAINT WYN HOWELLS, later the Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd (1925–2004), was born on 15 April 1925, the son of David John and Mary Blodwen Howells (née Davies), of Brynglas, Ponterwyd, Cardiganshire, on the slopes of the Pumlumon mountains, where his family had been Welsh-speaking farmers for seven generations. His background and upbringing were modest and simple, bordering on poverty. He was educated at Ponterwyd Primary School, where his strict headmaster was the father of Gareth Williams, the future Labour minister Lord Williams of Mostyn,¹ and then at Ardwyn Grammar School, Aberystwyth, before he returned to farm full-time with his father. Geraint Howells and his parents always used Welsh as their first language, and they were closely involved in the vibrant cultural life of the small village. David John Howells served as secretary of the Ponterwyd Eisteddfod, and his son was proud of the fact that he also later served as its secretary right through from 1944 until 2001.

Geraint Howells earned his living as a hill farmer at Glennydd, Ponterwyd in Cardiganshire, a substantial holding of some 750 acres, where he kept about 3,000 sheep, many of them prize-winning Speckled Faces, and where he boasted that he planted five acres of trees each year. Howells proved to be a very successful farmer despite working in the difficult terrain of the Welsh hills. In his youth, he was a champion sheep-shearer. He enlarged considerably the original holding, which he had inherited from his father, and he became a substantial figure in the Welsh woollen industry, serving as member for Wales on the British Wool Marketing Board from 1966 to 1987, and as its vice-chairman from 1971 to 1983. He was also the chairman of Wool Producers of Wales Ltd from 1977 to 1987. At one Liberal Party Assembly in Llandudno, probably the 1981 Assembly, Geraint Howells expertly caught a sheep which had escaped from its field and came running down a hillside towards a road!² From 1966 to 1983 he was the managing director of the

well-known Manchester-based meat wholesalers Wilkinson and Stanier. He was renowned for his large flock of Speckled Face sheep. As president of the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society, he proudly welcomed Queen Elizabeth II to the Society's annual show at Builth on 22 July 1983.

The fact that he came from modest, local farming stock automatically ensured for Geraint Howells a warm and affectionate place in the hearts of the people of Cardiganshire: 'I remember farming 250 acres on my father's farm when the net takings were only £60, and we were paying farm workers £5 a year'.³ At a relatively young age, Howells first entered political life as an independent councillor on the Cardiganshire County Council in 1962 – at this time it was normal practice in Welsh rural counties for Liberal members to stand as independents – and he soon became very well known and respected throughout the county, especially within its substantial farming community. His heartfelt adherence to the Liberal Party was an amalgam of the party's strong following and traditional power base in the county since the late nineteenth century, the political loyalties of his family, and his own reading and personal convictions. After Roderic Bowen, the Liberal MP for the county ever since 1945 and a prominent south Wales barrister, had lost Cardiganshire in the general election of 1966, he had no wish to return to political life thereafter.⁴ And Geraint Howells, by then quite a prominent public figure in the county, stood in the ensuing selection contest to become the next Liberal candidate for Cardiganshire. Although well known and personally popular, he received no more than four votes at the selection meeting as the local Liberal executive, claimed Howells himself, was packed with the relatives and personal friends of Huw Lloyd Williams, a native of Tregaron and the product of local farming stock. Howells attempted, too, at this time to gain the Liberal nomination for the neighbouring constituency of Merionydd – 'Once again I lost. This was a real pity as I felt I could have won that seat back for the Liberals. Instead

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they chose J. E. Thomas who put us into third position behind the Nationalists [in the 1970 general election].⁵

Selected there back in 1968, he eventually stood as the Liberal candidate for the Brecon and Radnor division in the June 1970 general election against the sitting Labour MP Caerwyn Rodrick, but he came a poor third in the election, after the Labour and Conservative candidates, with just 18.9 per cent of the vote. Howells was the first Liberal candidate to contest this seat since the 1950 general election, and party organisation in the constituency had become almost derelict. In that election campaign he expressed his personal Euro-scepticism, which was striking for a member of a pro-European party, through urging a delay in EEC entry. Howells had built up much goodwill towards the Liberals in the Brecon and Radnor division and he set up the basis of a first-class organisation there, which eventually led to the recapture of the seat by the Liberals in the form of Richard Livsey (later the Lord Livsey of Talgarth) in a by-election in June 1985. During this period Howells became one of the central players in the Welsh Liberal Party. He campaigned vigorously, mainly in Welsh, in favour of local improvements such as better rural transport, famously asserting in February 1973 that members of the general public should be permitted to make full use of school bus services, and later pressing for travel concessions for old age pensioners in December 1974.⁶ He had played a major part, too, in sorting out the numerous problems brought about by the abject failure of the experiment to have an Aberystwyth-based headquarters, so far removed from Cardiff and London and thus highly unpopular, for the recently established Welsh Liberal Party in 1968–69. He provided stalwart service in collecting and working through all the paperwork at the Aberystwyth office, personally settling most of the outstanding bills from his own pocket, and making lists of subscribers and council members for the use of the party treasurer. As late as April 1970, it was estimated that the unpaid bills at the former party headquarters at Aberystwyth amounted to no less than £1,155, the settlement of which caused huge embarrassment and difficulty for the fledgling Welsh Liberal Party.⁷ Following these unpleasant experiences, the Welsh party then resolved to move its Welsh headquarters to St Mary Street in Cardiff.⁸

Geraint Howells was clearly highly regarded both within the party in Wales and indeed nationally. Emlyn Hooson even then regarded him as 'a shrewd observer' of political life and trends and one who possessed 'strong feelings' on many issues.⁹ He was then nominated as the Liberal candidate for Cardiganshire in 1972, now facing no opponent for the nomination, having ensured that the local Liberal executive comprised many of his own friends and supporters.¹⁰ From the moment of his selection, he displayed determined tenacity

to rebuild the county as a Liberal stronghold, and in the 1973 county council elections he persuaded several of the old 'independent' councillors to stand under the formal 'Liberal' banner. Nine of these were elected, thus becoming the largest Liberal block on a local council anywhere in Wales. Howells's personal optimism surged as a result of Liberal Party by-election victories at Sutton and Cheam and Rochdale in 1972, 'The present position is that 16 per cent of the electorate – about six million people – are resolute Liberals. That is the finding of a recent NOP poll and it represents the highest percentage since Orpington. Something between 30 and 40 per cent of the electorate would like to vote Liberal if they thought there was a chance of success'.¹¹ When the provocative 'Westgate' suggested in his widely read *Western Mail* column in August that both the Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire constituencies might witness an electoral pact between the Liberals and Plaid Cymru, Howells was predictably aghast: 'I wish to point out and emphasise that no such pact has been considered and, contrary to Westgate's suggestion, no such meeting has been held to discuss the possibility. ... Not only do we intend to fight these constituencies, we intend to win!'.¹² His commitment to the cause of devolution was also unwavering. While the goal of 'the Nationalists' was, in his view, 'a separatist Wales which would take the Welsh people into the wilderness', the realistic aim of the Welsh Liberal Party was 'a Welsh Parliament [sitting] in Cardiff within the next few years'.¹³

At the February 1974 general election, capturing fully 40 per cent of the popular vote there, Geraint Howells won a rather surprising, but memorable, victory over the sitting Labour MP D. Elystan Morgan who had represented the division with much distinction since 1966. Howells's election was, it would seem, rather a startling departure from the well-established practice of sending well-spoken, professional men to represent Welsh constituencies at Westminster. (And in his background David Penhaligon, the Liberal MP for Truro from 1974 until 1986, also diverged from the familiar pattern.) There were many at the time who rued Howells's spectacular success in ousting an obviously rising Labour star who had already held junior ministerial office within the Home Office during an all-too-brief parliamentary career. He was widely known and generally highly respected. Both men were distinguished old boys of Ardwyn Grammar School, Aberystwyth – although Howells was seven years older than Morgan. Like Howells, Morgan was a son of the county and a member of a family which had 'farmed in the area for 400 years'.¹⁴

Throughout Wales in February 1974, the Liberals had captured their largest share of the popular vote ever since the general election of October 1931.¹⁵ Howells's friend, Emlyn Hooson, the Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire since 1962, recalled:

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Geraint Howells had made his maiden speech in the House of Commons on 14 March 1974 during that part of the debate on the Queen's Speech dealing with agriculture and prices. He pointed out to the House that he was the first MP from Cardiganshire for fifty years who did not belong to the legal profession, but that he was immensely proud to be a farmer.

Howells had a high reputation among farmers and he had also shown a sharp business acumen building up a very successful sheep- and cattle-dealing business and that he was also by this time a county councillor in Cardiganshire. The more I saw him the more I thought of him as a possible Liberal candidate for Cardiganshire, his native county. Elystan Morgan, the popular Labour Member for Cardiganshire who had ousted Roderick Bowen QC, would be difficult to defeat, but Geraint Howells could be the man to do it. For he was a very well-built, handsome man with a genial personality, and an attractive and cultured wife and two charming daughters all deeply involved in work in the community, particularly at his native Ponterwyd. His devotion to the welfare of the community there was just a foretaste of what he would achieve in Cardiganshire as a whole. I therefore did all I could to try to enable him to secure selection as the Liberal candidate for Cardiganshire at the 1970 election, which I believe he would have won. However, there was always a strong tendency in rural Wales, possibly particularly in the Liberal Party, to look for parliamentary candidates who had achieved academic, legal or other professional distinction, but had emerged from a sound Welsh rural background. . . . From the 1974 general election onwards, when he was elected MP for Cardigan, Howells and I worked particularly closely together. Our private discussions were always conducted in Welsh and it was rarely that we disagreed on any subject.¹⁶

In some circles in the county, especially nationalist ones, Elystan Morgan was viewed as a 'turn-coat' or 'traitor' as he had 'defected' from Plaid Cymru in 1965, shortly before capturing the division the following year, and he had recently expressed firm opposition to the establishment of the Welsh-medium school Penweddig at Aberystwyth, a move which Howells had warmly endorsed. Indeed the local general election campaign degenerated into a decidedly unpleasant affair, with many nasty personal attacks and much backbiting. The local Labour Party had attempted to portray Howells unfairly as 'a bumbling peasant unfit to stand for Parliament'. When illness prevented Howells from turning out for a vital pre-election rally at the Great Hall of the Aberystwyth Arts Centre on the Sunday afternoon preceding the poll, and Winston Roddick had to put in a last-minute appearance to represent him, Elystan Morgan callously accused his opponent of 'being afraid to face him', enraging the numerous Liberal students present who then attempted to 'boo' Morgan off the stage. When Howells did win through on election night, his victory speech at the count was repeatedly interrupted by infantile sheep noises which detracted somewhat from his spectacular victory.¹⁷ It was, however, the first time the Liberals had regained a Welsh seat since the end of the Second World War. A

proud Emlyn Hooson commented on his friend's victory at the polls, widely tipped in Liberal circles, 'I am delighted that Cardiganshire is back in the Liberal fold. We are coming back as a major force in Welsh political life'.¹⁸ Howells himself, fully appreciative of 'the tremendous enthusiasm throughout the campaign . . . all the effort and goodwill', was predictably exuberant and proud, hailing the local outcome as 'a landmark in the history of Cardiganshire'.¹⁹

Eight months later, in October 1974, Howells, who had much impressed his constituents as an effective, responsive constituency MP in the intervening months, held the seat against a further challenge from Elystan Morgan. At both these general elections, his majority was around 2,500 votes. By the following summer Elystan Morgan, fully preoccupied with his burgeoning professional career as a barrister, had resolved that he had no wish to stand again in Cardiganshire. Plans were laid to receive nominations and select a successor Labour candidate for Cardiganshire.²⁰ In 1979, Howells held the seat by a little over 2,000 votes above the Conservative candidate Emlyn Thomas who polled fully 30 per cent of the vote. Thomas had actually been the first general secretary of the Welsh Liberal Party back in 1969, based at its Aberystwyth headquarters with a staff of just two. Aberystwyth had been chosen as the location of the party headquarters partly because it was the Liberals' top target seat in Wales at this time. The failure of the outfit had seen Thomas, previously the secretary of the Farmers' Union of Wales, lose interest in the cause and later join the Conservatives.²¹

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Mr Wilson's devolution crumbs. We are not going to accept the role of being second-class citizens in Wales'.²³ From the very beginning of his parliamentary career, Howells had put down a long succession of questions on Welsh issues and affairs.²⁴

Jeremy Thorpe, the Liberal leader, appointed Geraint Howells to be the party's spokesman on Wales in the House of Commons. When Thorpe resigned the party leadership two years later, Howells supported David Steel (rather than John Pardoe) during his successful campaign to become party leader in June 1976. He eagerly applauded Steel for his 'down-to-earth radical approach to British politics which comes across to the man in the street. Liberals and non-Liberals alike will respond to his sincerity of purpose and forthright style'.²⁵ Howells was one of four Liberal MPs at this time to come out publicly in support of David Steel's candidature.²⁶ The membership of the Cardiganshire Liberal Association, clearly following the lead of their MP, voted by the wide margin of forty-four votes to six in favour of Steel, who also won substantial majorities among the Liberal activists of the Carmarthenshire and Wrexham divisions.²⁷

The following month, to reward him for his support and in part because there were so few Liberal MPs (which meant that each had to be given some area of responsibility really), Steel appointed Geraint Howells to the post of Liberal spokesman on agriculture and Wales. Howells supported a bill to prevent farm workers from being ousted from tied cottages, he deplored the end of the pig subsidy, and he campaigned effectively on behalf of small businessmen. He was a strong supporter of the 'pact' between the Liberal Party and the Labour government under James Callaghan in 1977–78 because he hoped that the government would pursue a policy of devolution, a course which now seemed more likely with the consistently pro-devolutionist Michael Foot (MP for Ebbw Vale) as the Leader of the House of Commons. Howells also hoped, perhaps rather forlornly, that Prime Minister James Callaghan, as the Labour MP for Cardiff South, would lend his active support to the cause of devolution. In July Geraint Howells pressed for a firm deadline on Welsh devolution within the context of the 'Lib–Lab' pact. Initially he insisted that his support for the highly contentious agreement would be wholly conditional upon the response of the Labour government to 'the request for a minister for the self-employed and the setting up of the land bank'.²⁸ Howells's fellow Liberal MP Cyril Smith (Rochdale) was hostile to the conclusion of any such pact. At a Liberal Party meeting to review the Lib–Lab pact after it had been operational for three months, David Steel noted, 'Geraint Howells said that the agreement had gone down badly at first in Wales, but was now more popular'.²⁹ In fact, there were many opponents to the idea of

the pact throughout the Liberal Party, but they were especially numerous and vocal in Wales. Indeed, in January 1978 Welsh Liberals called for an end to the arrangement – to be implemented long before the calling of a general election.³⁰ Both Geraint Howells and Emlyn Hooson had argued strongly and consistently that the perpetuation of the Lib–Lab pact was sustaining interest in devolution and delaying a likely Conservative victory at the next general election.

Geraint Howells was also able, during the period of the Lib–Lab pact, to secure recognition for the Farmers Union of Wales (the FUW), formed way back in 1955 to safeguard the interests of the Welsh farming community, as one of the official unions for government negotiations. On being given a lift in the ministerial car, he persuaded John Silkin, the Labour Minister of Agriculture, to grant official recognition to the FUW as henceforth an official negotiating partner with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and also with the Welsh Office. The FUW thus enjoyed the same status as the far more powerful and numerous National Farmers' Union (the NFU), an achievement of which Geraint Howells remained immensely proud throughout his life and often mentioned even in his old age. When the devolution bills were under consideration at Westminster in 1977, Howells argued strongly that the Scotland Bill and the Wales Bill should come to the House of Commons at about the same time or otherwise he would not support the government. In an interview published in the Welsh periodical *Barn*, he said that if the government and MPs of all parties turned against devolution, then he himself would turn to support Plaid Cymru or to another political party in Wales – 'He says that for him the goal of a Welsh parliament is the most important part of Liberal policy'. He had, he insisted, pressed the matter upon David Steel:

Whatever happens we must ensure that the two devolution bills [for Scotland and for Wales] should have their second reading at the same time, or within a day of one another. *If we were to fail completely to get a parliament for Wales within the next ten years, and if I saw the Government and the members of all parties turning against devolution, then I would turn to Plaid Cymru or to another party that represented Wales. That is the way I would go.* But I do not think that we will fail this time. We must get a Parliament for Wales next time round.³¹

From top:
Geraint Howells after his re-election in 1987.
Howells with Richard Livsey (MP for Brecon & Radnor 1985–92 and 1997–2001)
Howells as a member of the House of Lords

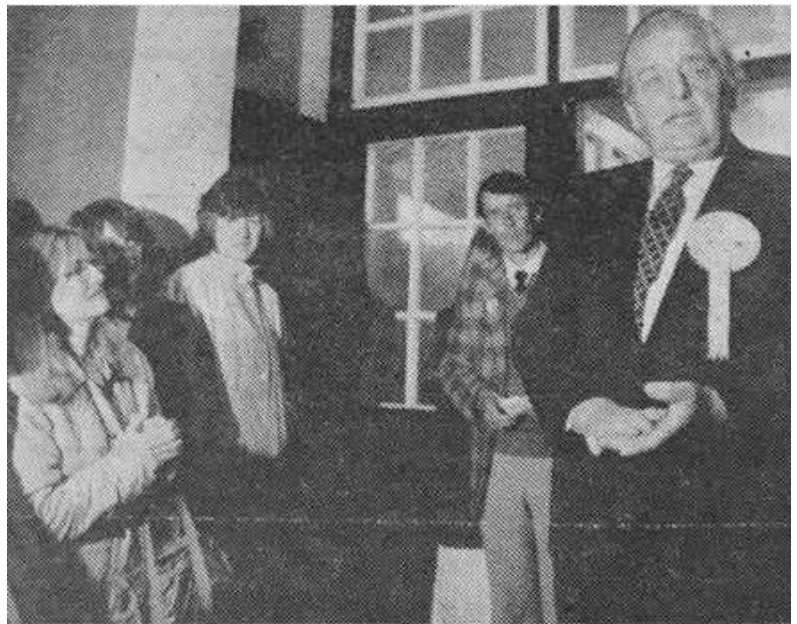
Indeed, by December 1978, by which time the Lib–Lab pact had formally come to an end, he was the only Liberal still voting consistently with the Labour Party in the House of Commons. Meanwhile, he continued to campaign vigorously on behalf of Welsh hill farmers and he was fiercely opposed to the abolition of the Meat and Livestock Commission. He also served effectively during his first term in parliament as chairman

of the Liberal Party's Committee on Small Businesses and the Self-employed and as a member of the British Agricultural Export Council.

Like his fellow Liberal MP from Wales Emlyn Hooson, Montgomeryshire, Geraint Howells campaigned strongly for a 'Yes' vote in the referendum of 1 March 1979. Following the abject failure of the devolution proposals in the 1979 referendum, Howells continued to argue for devolution and for measures to support the Welsh language. At the Cardigan Eisteddfod in 1976, he had urged local authorities to give Welsh culture its proper place in the education of every child: 'We must stand firm to our tradition and our Welshness'. When the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs produced a report on the provision for Welsh language programmes on the new fourth television channel, Geraint Howells and Geraint Morgan, the Conservative MP for Denbighshire, presented a minority report urging that Welsh language programmes should be increased by five hours a week each year until one channel in Wales was broadcasting entirely in the Welsh language.³² In July 1980, Howells pressed Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister, to capitulate to Gwynfor Evans's starvation threat in relation to the establishment of a Welsh language television channel.³³ Indeed, one historian of the Liberal Party in Wales has described Geraint Howells as 'the Welsh Nationalist Liberal' MP.³⁴ Interviewed in 2003, Howells himself said, 'I was a Welsh nationalist and a Liberal as well. There was no need to join Plaid Cymru with those credentials. Liberalism was in my blood and that of my family. My grandmother was nearly thrown off her farm for voting Liberal in the 1880s by the Conservative landlord. I never thought of being in any other party'.³⁵

After Emlyn Hooson had lost Montgomeryshire in the May 1979 general election, Howells was left as the sole Liberal MP in the whole of Wales. As David Steel told a party rally at Cardiff in April 1980, 'The centre ground of politics has not lain so empty for decades. It's waiting to be occupied, and we're there in growing strength to do this'.³⁶ Geraint Howells recalled the situation vividly, 'I was both the leader of the Welsh party and agriculture spokesman. It was very hard: you ended up speaking everywhere. I was glad, therefore, when Alex [Carlisle] won Montgomeryshire back in 1983. It got even better in 1985 when Richard [Livsey] won Brecon & Radnor and there were then three Liberal MPs in Wales'.³⁷ Indeed Howells had made a significant contribution to Livsey's 1985 by-election victory by travelling to the Brecon and Radnor constituency to address public meetings on his behalf, and sternly warning his fellow sheep-farmers there of the likely outcome of a Labour victory at the poll.³⁸

This was also the period which saw a spate of fires at second and holiday homes in parts of rural mid-Wales. Geraint Howells spoke out sensibly:



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The recent spate of arson carried out against second homes in remote areas must be strongly condemned by all Liberals. It is a very sad situation when small, closely knit communities die away, when work is scarce, and money in short supply. Local people will naturally resent a situation where house prices are forced up by people from prosperous areas, who visit their second homes for barely one month in a year, and for the rest leave them empty, while people have to remain on council house waiting lists sometimes for years. I believe that local councils should be actively encouraged to buy up available properties within village boundaries, renovate it, and offer it for rent to local inhabitants.³⁹

The formation of the Social Democratic Party (the SDP) in March 1981 had challenged the Liberal Party for the centre ground of British politics. The two parties were then brought together in 'the Alliance', a group formed in September 1981 in order to pool their electoral efforts. A traditional Liberal, Howells was not at all enthusiastic about the formation of the Alliance. He believed that his party should concentrate its resources within Wales on some nineteen key seats at the forthcoming general election rather than putting up candidates in all the Welsh constituencies as had happened back in 1979.⁴⁰ His scepticism in relation to the concept of the Alliance was confirmed at the 1983 general election when only six Alliance candidates from the Social Democratic Party were among the twenty-three Alliance members returned to parliament. Now Howells offered the electors of Cardiganshire 'an end to the stale old adversarial politics practised by the Tory and Labour Parties and ... a totally new approach based on co-operation and partnership'.⁴¹ It would appear that by this time he was rather more enamoured of the SDP than previously.

Beneath his amiable and relaxed exterior, Howells could be a tough fighter when the occasion demanded. He did not warm at all to David Owen, leader of the Social Democratic Party after 1983, and his long-term loyalty to David Steel over many long years did not prevent him from accusing Steel of playing second fiddle to David Owen.⁴² His barbed comments were his gut reaction to Steel's apparent abandonment of the traditional Liberal loyalty to the setting up of a Welsh assembly. In 1985, he complained that 'David Steel has ratted on us' in retreating from the Liberal commitment to a Welsh assembly, because he was, claimed Geraint Howells, 'a puppet in David Owen's waistcoat pocket'. This wounding comment received widespread currency at the time. However, the Liberal-SDP alliance persevered with Howells, making him spokesman for Wales in its pre-election team in January 1987 (again partly due to the lack of Liberal MPs); the next month he proclaimed the Alliance plan for a Welsh 'senedd' (parliament).

Howells's doubts about the party leadership were confirmed again at the 1987 general election when only twenty-two Alliance candidates were elected to the House of Commons, now including six members of the SDP. Following this election, David Steel called for a merger of the two parties, a move which was eventually achieved on 3 March 1989. A key member of the Liberal team responsible for negotiating the merger with the SDP, Howells fought very hard to guarantee the survival of the name 'Liberal', knowing the strong feeling about it in Lloyd George's west Wales.⁴³ (Indeed, Howells's favourite seat in the House of Commons tearoom was beneath a portrait of David Lloyd George, and he was outraged when this was later removed in April 1981, protesting virulently against the move.) During the protracted merger talks, he was heard to complain bitterly that the former SDPer Bob Maclennan 'won't give way on anything'. But, after the tortuous negotiations had finally reached a successful conclusion the following month, Geraint Howells proclaimed jubilantly at the launch gathering of the newly formed party, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, 'We will be in government by the turn of the century'.⁴⁴

Howells supported Alan Beith, the party's treasury spokesman and the deputy leader of the old Liberal Party, a Welsh speaker too, as the leader of the new party. Indeed, Howells readily became Beith's campaign manager in the party leadership contest.⁴⁵ However, he worked well with Paddy Ashdown, the successful candidate for the leadership. Howells was determined to retain the party's Liberal traditional identity and he played a key role in establishing 'Liberal Democrats' as its new name. When the new party's annual conference convened at Blackpool at the end of September 1988 voted to adopt the short title of 'The Democrats', Geraint Howells was one of five MPs who rebelled against the contentious decision, proclaiming their intention to 'operate as a distinct group within the parliamentary party, pursuing an independent line although retaining their front-bench spokesmanships'.⁴⁶ A whole year later, the issue was still dividing Welsh Liberals as party members received ballot papers on the divisive and contentious subject. Howells felt so strongly on the matter that he even threatened to resign from the party and 'form a "breakaway" party unless the name "Liberal" is kept in the title'.⁴⁷ There was further dissension at the same time over a proposal from Dafydd Elis Thomas, the Plaid Cymru president and MP for Merionydd Nant Conwy, to Howells that the two parties might form 'an electoral pact' not to fight each other in selected constituencies. As both parties now had three MPs apiece in Wales, the Plaid Cymru national executive was supportive of such an agreement, but Howells and other prominent Welsh Liberals were most reluctant.⁴⁸ Howells was still very much a Euro-sceptic. And he continued to campaign on behalf of the Welsh

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language (he successfully lobbied for a Welsh-language guidebook to the House of Commons) and a parliament for Wales. He was also a member of the National Eisteddfod's Gorsedd of Bards and a past President of the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show. He gladly became a deacon at Ponterwyd Calvinistic Methodist chapel.

Geraint Howells also had an avid interest in third world politics and he denounced the introduction of milk quotas in 1983 as a major political blunder, arguing that the surpluses should be used to help the starving millions in the third world.⁴⁹ He remained highly sceptical about the European Union and he fought the European proposals that would have crippled British sheep farmers. Howells was at his best in December 1991, when, as agriculture spokesman appointed by Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown, he fought proposals by EC agriculture commissioner Ray MacSharry that would have crippled sheep farmers in the less-favoured areas of Wales, Scotland, Northumberland and the Borders. From 1987 to 1992, Howells had served as a member of the Speaker's Panel (responsible for chairing public bill committees and other general committees), and early in 1992 he led a deputation to Brussels to discuss the problems of Welsh farmers with the Agricultural Commissioner there. Some months later, during the debate on the Maastricht Treaty in November 1992, he, by now in the House of Lords, opposed Paddy Ashdown's policy of voting with the government and he wrote to all Liberal Democrat MPs, urging them to vote with the Labour Party or else to abstain.

By the time of the 1987 general election, the Ceredigion constituency had been enlarged to include North Pembrokeshire, which extended down as far as the town of Fishguard. Howells held the seat with a fine majority of 4,700 votes over the Conservative candidate. His Westminster secretary and agent was Judi Lewis (later to become the Welsh Liberal Democrat chief executive from 1992 until 1997), whilst one of his parliamentary researchers for a five-year stint from his graduation at Aberystwyth in 1987 until 1992 was Mark Williams who was later to recapture the Ceredigion seat for the Liberal Democrats in 2005, retaining the now marginal seat until his defeat in the June 2017 general election when it reverted to Plaid Cymru.

On 9 April 1992, however, Howells, by now something of a Liberal Party elder statesman at Westminster, lost his seat when Cynog Dafis, the Plaid Cymru candidate, came from fourth place in 1987 to win a surprising and decisive victory with a majority of 3,100 votes over Howells, who came second with just a hundred votes more than the Conservative candidate. Cynog Dafis stood on the novel joint platform of Plaid Cymru and the Green Party. 'Let's make history on our own doorstep' was the rallying election cry of the new, dynamic joint candidature: 'To get action on the things that matter most – for Wales and the

Planet. It's an opportunity not to be missed'.⁵⁰ If Geraint Howells was rejected in 1992 by the electorate, it was in part because heart trouble had slowed him down, though he later benefited from a triple by-pass operation. Afflicted by arthritis in the knee from an old football injury and suffering from severe angina, Howells had slowed down conspicuously during his last term in the House of Commons, and, for the April 1992 general election campaign, he participated in too few public meetings in his enlarged Ceredigion and North Pembroke constituency. Widespread local rumours that Howells was by now seriously ill and conjecture that he was, as a result, neglecting his constituency work had helped to unseat him. Interviewed in 2003, he openly admitted, 'I knew I had lost my seat because my campaign team was weak. They thought that they'd won, but I knew that in my heart that this wasn't going to be the case. Everyone seemed convinced we'd won except me. Cynog Dafis (Plaid Cymru) was able to more than double his vote from the previous election. My key supporters who had won the seat for me in 1974 had by then died off. The seat is winnable again for us though. Mark Williams has brought the vote back up; we'll get the seat back again'.⁵¹ The outcome was one of the shock results of the 1992 general election.

Howells was then made a life peer in the dissolution honours list published on 6 June 1992 and, remembering his loyalty to his native village, he took the title of Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd in the County of Dyfed. The highly popular move to the Lords – warmly applauded both in the constituency, where he was highly regarded personally and so many rued his recent electoral defeat, and in the Liberal Party nationally – meant that there was to be no real break in his parliamentary career. Shortly after being created a life peer, he told the House of Lords, 'For those who live and work in the countryside, the reality is too often grinding poverty, compounded by poor housing, inadequate services, non-existent public transport and a chronic low-wage economy which drives away youth and enterprise'.⁵² He was appointed Deputy Speaker of the House of Lords in 1994. He also served in the Upper House as Deputy Chairman of Committees and as his party's spokesman on Welsh rural affairs.

In the House of Lords, as previously within the Commons, Howells was never over-anxious to speak in debates, and he kept to his main enthusiasms – notably the Welsh language, a parliament for Wales, and agriculture, most notably the plight of the Welsh hill farmers. He was eminently commonsensical and pragmatic, displaying insight, shrewdness and first-rate judgement. He was a strong supporter of the new Welsh Language Act of 1993, although he continued to press for full parity with English, and he was much enamoured of the devolution proposals placed before parliament by the Labour government in 1997. Until almost a month before his death, he

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attended the House of Lords regularly; at that time, he signed, with other Welsh peers, a letter to the *Western Mail* which asked for a swift and positive response to the proposals of the Richard Commission on devolution which had been set up in July 2002:

The Richard Commission Report on Welsh devolution, published today, is a pioneering document of constitutional reform. It deserves a swift and positive response. Richard shows how measures sought by the Welsh Assembly are seldom taken up at Westminster. Usually, they vanish without trace: only a quarter of the Assembly’s proposals have found room on the Westminster agenda. Another problem is the role of the Wales Office, potentially a barrier rather than a conduit. With changes of government and diversity of policies between Westminster and Wales this could lead to a major political crisis. Richard’s logic is for the extension of primary powers to the Welsh Assembly over a period of time. We warmly endorse this. The extended functions of the Assembly should be made crystal clear. ... Richard’s searching analysis can make Welsh devolution a reality and create a vibrant democracy.⁵³

On 19 March 1998, he was appointed one of the five peers, from all parties, chosen to be Extra Lords in Waiting who carried out ceremonial duties for the Sovereign. He was the first Liberal to hold this position for a full century. In one of his last speeches in the House of Lords in April 2002, he called for realistic livestock prices and the stamping out of illegal meat imports. He was a close personal friend of both Richard Livsey and Emlyn Hooson, both of whom he served with at Westminster in the House of Commons and the House of Lords.⁵⁴ He made his last appearance in the House at a St David’s Day luncheon in February 2004.

Lord Geraint continued to play an active part in Cardiganshire life after he had entered the House of Lords. When a new unitary authority was formed under the name of Cardiganshire on 1 April 1996, he was disappointed when his campaign to retain the old name failed and the County Council changed the name to Ceredigion. While still a member of the House of Commons, he had launched an appeal to provide a scanner for Bronglais Hospital, Aberystwyth. He raised more than £1,000,000, and, in recognition of his remarkable efforts, the new palliative care resource centre, opened at Bronglais Hospital in August 2006, was named the Tŷ Geraint Palliative Care Resource Centre. About £45,000 raised by the appeal was also donated to help build and equip Tŷ Geraint.⁵⁵ He launched the scanner and cancer appeal in 1990 to raise money for the hospital, exceeding the £1m target he had set for the Millennium. Dr Alan Axford, Ceredigion and Mid Wales NHS Trust’s medical director, said,

‘Lord Geraint was particularly supportive of the cancer ward so we thought it was appropriate that there should be some recognition of his major contribution to this hospital’.⁵⁶ He was very active in his local community, spearheading several other worthwhile fundraising campaigns. At the very time of his electoral defeat in the spring of 1992, Geraint Howells, a long-term member of *Gorsedd y Beirdd*, was acting as the active chairman of the finance committee of the Ceredigion Aberystwyth National Eisteddfod due to be held the following August.

A large man, with a slow rolling walk, Lord Geraint had immense personal warmth and he was widely known within his constituency and throughout Wales simply as ‘Geraint’. At the same time, he was an astute politician who spoke sparingly in parliament and generally only on subjects within his expertise. When he joined a delegation of parliamentarians on a fact-finding mission to the Falkland Islands soon after the war with Argentina back in 1982, he visited a remote sheep farm and amazed the islanders with his expert knowledge of peat drying and sheep farming. Matthew Parris, then a Conservative MP, recalled admiringly, ‘Geraint did something to restore our reputation by visiting an isolated sheep farm with me, inspecting their peat-drying arrangements, and for the next half-hour talking peat with his hosts with such happy expertise that they admitted themselves amazed at his knowledge. They had not known there was peat in Wales too, they said. Geraint would have made an excellent governor of the colony’.⁵⁷ He had married Mary Olwen Hughes Griffiths, the daughter of M. A. Griffiths, on 7 September 1957; they had two daughters, Gaenor, born in 1961, who became a newsreader with the BBC World Service, and Mari, born in 1965. They were a notably close-knit family. Lord Geraint continued to live at Glennydd, Ponterwyd; he died on 17 April 2004, and his funeral was held on 24 April at Ponterwyd Calvinistic Methodist Chapel, where he had served as deacon for many years. A large number of mourners from Cardiganshire, from Welsh public life, and from the Liberal Party, were present. He left an estate of £937,757 net.

Described by Michael White as ‘the Robert Mitchum of the sheep fells’, this genial, shrewd Welsh hill farmer much enriched Westminster life for more than thirty years. Dubbed ‘big, shambling [with a] weather-beaten face, tweedy clothes [and] heavy footed’, he will always be remembered for his unwavering commitment and devotion to the interests of farmers and small businesses, his own constituency and to the cause of Welsh devolution.⁵⁸ Another commentator, Bruce Anderson, accurately described him in *The Spectator* as possessing ‘an archetypal Welsh mixture of charm and cunning’.⁵⁹ Matthew Parris neatly dubbed Howells ‘a tremendous, lumbering, ageing, wily, amiable Liberal from Wales, with huge ears’; while another political commentator

described him as ‘popular, respected, genial-shrewd Welsh-speaking hill farmers’ friend, more passionate in Welsh and more canny than he dissembles’.⁶⁰ Howells’s warmth and friendliness made him widely popular in all parties. At the time of his death, Lord Hooson recalled:

He was a fine man, a good friend and exuded warmth and generosity of spirit wherever he went. He will be missed greatly in Wales and in the Lords; from his colleagues to all the staff who were obviously appreciative of his ever kindly and natural and rural approach. To the counsels of the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party, Geraint Howells brought a shrewd mind and a stubborn resistance to any tendency to take the short- as opposed to the long-term solution to political problems.⁶¹

Paying tribute to Lord Geraint, the then leader of the Liberal Democrats the late Charles Kennedy described him as a ‘treasured Celtic cousin. . . . With Geraint’s passing our party has lost a good and instrumental figure – and his beloved Wales has lost an authentic son of its soil’.⁶² Lembit Opik, then the Welsh Liberal Democrat leader and Montgomeryshire MP, said, ‘For most of us in the party Geraint was a mentor, a sort of political uncle. If you were trying to do something, Geraint had usually had a go a few years before. But more than anything Geraint really had the heart of the party. People just cared about him because he cared about them’.⁶³

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1 See his obituary in *The Guardian*, 22 Sep. 2003.
 2 Information provided by one of the anonymous reviewers of an earlier draft of this article.
 3 Cited in J. Graham Jones, ‘Geraint Howells (Lord Geraint), 1925–’, in Duncan Brack et al. (ed.), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (London, 1998), p. 190.
 4 See J. Graham Jones, ‘Grimond’s rival’, *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 34/35, pp. 26–34.
 5 Russell Deacon, ‘Interview: Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd’, *Journal of Liberal History*, 44 (Autumn 2004), p. 22.
 6 Andrew Roth, *Parliamentary Profiles*, vol. ii, E–K (Parliamentary Profiles, 1989), p. 721.

7 National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), Lord Ogmore Papers, file 6, Lord Ogmore to Geraint Howells, 27 Apr. 1970 (copy).
 8 Russell Deacon, ‘A History of the Welsh Liberal Party’, ch. 5, p.16, pre-publication draft very kindly placed at my disposal by Professor Deacon.
 9 NLW, Lord Ogmore Papers, file 6, Emlyn Hooson to Ogmore, 17 Apr. 1970.
 10 Deacon, ‘Interview: Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd’, p. 23.
 11 NLW, Liberal Party of Wales Archive, file B11, 1973 New Year Message from Geraint W. Howells.
 12 NLW, Liberal Party of Wales Archive, file B11, Geraint Howells, chairman of the Welsh Liberal Party, to the editor of the *Western Mail*, 20 Aug. 1973.
 13 NLW, Liberal Party of Wales Archive, file B11, press statement issued by the Cardiganshire Liberal Association, 28 Sep. 1973.
 14 Cited in P. J. Madgwick, Non Griffiths and Valerie Walker, *The Politics of Rural Wales: a Study of Cardiganshire* (Hutchinson, 1973), pp. 213–14.
 15 See David Roberts, ‘The strange death of Liberal Wales’, in John Osmond (ed.), *The National Question again: Welsh Political Identity in the 1980s* (Gomer, 1985), pp. 92–93.
 16 Emlyn Hooson, ‘Geraint Howells: Farmer who became a Welsh Liberal MP’, *The Independent*, 27 Apr. 2004.
 17 Deacon, ‘A History of the Welsh Liberal Party’, ch. 5, p. 22.
 18 *The Times*, 1 Mar. 1974, p. 3.
 19 NLW, Merfyn Jones Papers 79/5, Geraint Howells to Jones, 3 Apr. 1974 (circular letter).
 20 *Cardigan and Tivyside Advertiser*, 27 Jun. 1975.
 21 Deacon, ‘Interview: Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd’, p. 23.
 22 See the report of Howells’s maiden speech in *The Times*, 15 Mar. 1974, p. 14.
 23 *The Times*, 13 Sep. 1974, p. 4.
 24 See examples in the NLW, Liberal Party of Wales Archive, file A8.
 25 *The Times*, 15 Jun. 1976, p. 4.
 26 The other three were Clement Freud (Isle of Ely), Stephen Ross (Isle of Wight) and Emlyn Hooson (Montgomeryshire). The caretaker party leader Jo Grimond and recently deposed leader Jeremy Thorpe refused to commit themselves. Three Liberal MPs supported John Pardoe.
 27 *The Times*, 1 Jul. 1976, p. 2.
 28 *The Times*, 28 Jul. 1977, p. 2.
 29 David Steel, *A House Divided: the Lib–Lab Pact and the Future of British Politics* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p. 32.
 30 *The Times*, 16 Jan. 1978.
 31 Trevor Fishlock, ‘Liberal MP hints he may turn to Plaid Cymru’, *The Times*, 29 Jul. 1977, p. 2. The emphasis is mine.
 32 *The Times*, 25 Jul. 1981, p. 14.

33 Roth, *Parliamentary Profiles*, p. 722.
 34 Russell Deacon, ‘The slow death of Liberal Wales, 1906–1979’, *Journal of Liberal History*, 49 (Winter 2005–06), p. 21.
 35 Deacon, ‘Interview: Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd’, p. 23.
 36 *The Guardian*, 28 Apr. 1980.
 37 Deacon, ‘Interview: Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd’, p. 23.
 38 Roth, *Parliamentary Profiles*, p. 722.
 39 *The Guardian*, 28 Apr. 1980.
 40 *The Guardian*, 21 Jan. 1983.
 41 NLW, Welsh Political Ephemera Collection, file BA2/13, election address of Geraint Howells, June 1983.
 42 Cited in his obituary in *The Times*, 20 Apr. 2004, p. 26.
 43 Andrew Roth, ‘Lord Geraint: Liberal MP and popular spokesman in Wales’, *The Guardian*, 17 Apr. 2004.
 44 Roth, *Parliamentary Profiles*, p. 723.
 45 *The Times*, 9 May 1988, p. 2.
 46 *The Times*, 27 Sep. 1988, p. 1.
 47 *The Times*, 14 Sep. 1989, p. 8.
 48 Ibid.
 49 *The Times*, 19 Sep. 1984.
 50 NLW, Welsh Political Ephemera Collection, file BA4/13, Cynog Dafis election leaflet, April 1992.
 51 Deacon, ‘Interview: Lord Geraint of Ponterwyd’, p. 23.
 52 See Lord Geraint’s obituary in *The Telegraph*, 19 Apr. 2004.
 53 *Western Mail*, 31 Mar. 2004.
 54 See Emlyn Hooson, *Rebirth or Death?: Liberalism in Wales in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century*, the Welsh Political Archive Lecture 1993 (National Library of Wales, 1994), pp. 9–10.
 55 *Western Mail*, 7 Aug. 2006: ‘New care centre named after loyal supporter’.
 56 Ibid.
 57 Matthew Paris, *Chance Witness: an Outsider’s Life in Politics* (Viking, 2002), p. 318.
 58 Cited in Jones, ‘Geraint Howells’, p. 190.
 59 Andrew Roth, ‘Lord Geraint’.
 60 Paris, *Chance Witness*, p. 311; Roth, *Parliamentary Profiles*, p. 721. The implication here is that Howells was shrewder and more politically astute than he appeared to many on a superficial view.
 61 Hooson, ‘Geraint Howells’.
 62 BBC website, Mid Wales pages, consulted 26 Feb. 2013.
 63 Politics.co.uk website, consulted 26 Feb. 2013.