

Clement Davies (1884–1962) Liberal Party leader 1945–56

Violet Bonham Carter wrote in her diary of Clement Davies after his death in 1962, 'One could not help feeling great affection for him and in one way he inspired great respect. He gave up a big income at Levers to serve the party and refused office in W's 1951 Govt ... when I thought (perhaps mistakenly?) that it would have been right for us to go in.'

Bonham Carter's comment on Davies is a fair summary of what most current Liberal Democrats – if they have heard of him at all (and his biographer Alun Wyburn-Powell described him as 'perhaps the least known leader of the Liberal Party'), remember about Davies today – that he was leader of the party during the period between Lloyd George and Grimond and that his main contribution to its survival was not taking a cabinet post in Churchill's 1951–55 government when it was offered to him.

Davies's role in Liberal survival has, however, been sometimes downplayed and, arguably, he was the only leader who could have maintained its independence and kept it alive after the bitter disappointment of the 1945 election. He put all his formidable energy and determination into doing so as leader. His political life resonates too with other

themes of this issue of the *Journal*, including his Liberal National past and his role in engaging with different Liberal ideas during the Second World War.

Born in Llanfyllin, Montgomeryshire, in rural mid Wales into a middle-class family, he began as a barrister in 1909, becoming a successful KC. Immensely talented and hard-working as a lawyer, Unilever saw his abilities after he acted for them in a case and brought him in as Managing Director and General Counsel in 1930. By 1929, however, he had become the Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire; but after some initial shillyshallying Unilever agreed that he could continue his board service whilst remaining a MP. Davies became a Liberal National during the 1931 Parliament, although he continued to maintain his business career. Davies also led an acclaimed, wide-ranging inquiry into the incidence of tuberculosis in Wales and was part of a commission looking at West African matters.

The conduct of the Second World War by the government led by Neville Chamberlain brought him more fully into Parliamentary politics. Increasingly dissatisfied, Davies became chairman of a cross-party group known as the 'Vigilantes', which monitored

Chamberlain's performance as a war leader. He then played a key role in coordinating the political pressure that led to Chamberlain's resignation and his replacement by Churchill (and not by Halifax) in May 1940. Davies was disappointed not to be offered the senior government role that he thought his actions deserved and remained a backbencher, gradually not only moving back to the Liberal Party during the course of the war but also supporting Radical Action, the more economically and socially interventionist group within the party.

Davies's private life was blighted by the tragic death in their twenties of three of his four children during the war, with resulting bouts of deep depression that periodically gripped him thereafter. Nonetheless by the end of the war Davies had established himself in the party.

After the disappointing 1945 general election, which saw the defeat not only of Sir Archibald Sinclair, the party's leader, but of all the remaining MPs who represented urban areas or who had held government office, the parliamentary party was reduced to twelve. Of those, three were credible leadership contenders: Megan Lloyd George, Wilfrid Roberts and Davies himself.

Seen as hard-working, financially secure and, like the majority of the parliamentary party, Welsh, Davies was a natural choice as what was initially seen as a caretaker leader until Sinclair returned to the Commons (which in the end never happened).

Initially seeking to influence Attlee's Labour government from the left, Davies found that hard to do under pressure from Sinclair and Violet Bonham Carter to maintain the more traditional Liberal line of equidistance. He would sometimes jest about the stresses of holding the ring between the Scylla of Megan Lloyd George and the Charybdis of Violet Bonham Carter – both by now leading figures in the party – who sought to pull him in opposite directions, eager, as they were, to maintain the old rivalry between their fathers which had split it apart twenty years before. He concentrated on managing the party as a formal institution with well-defined roles and responsibilities. His appointment of Megan Lloyd George in 1949 as the party's deputy leader was a political masterstroke, keeping the left of the party onside whilst pursuing steadily more right-leaning policies. He was also quite happy for Bonham Carter to discuss future arrangements with potentially sympathetic Conservatives such as Butler and Churchill. Whilst the Liberals supported the earlier nationalisations and the formation of the National Health



Clement Davies in 1936 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

Service, by the time that the nationalisation of the iron and steel industry became the main area of political disagreement between Labour and Conservatives, Davies, following his business experience, was strongly opposed.

The 1950 election resulted in a further decline in the number of Liberal MPs to nine, and highlighted the failure of the party's broad-front strategy of standing as many candidates as it could. Significantly for the future, this was the election at which Jo Grimond was returned as MP for Orkney & Shetland. However, the disappointing results led

to another slump in the party's morale. Three potentially disgruntled and disruptive MPs remained, including Megan Lloyd George. Davies wrote to the public intellectual, Gilbert Murray, 'If you attended ... meetings of the Parliamentary Party ... I believe that you would come to the conclusion that there is no Party today but a number of individuals who ... come together only to express completely divergent views.'

More significantly for the party's survival, Churchill's Conservatives despite an 84 per cent turnout at the election, were seventeen seats short of Attlee's

Labour Party, which scraped back into power with a majority of five. Churchill had himself been a Liberal until March 1924 and was a close friend of Violet Bonham Carter. With some support from Sinclair, Bonham Carter now argued that the Liberals should, in exchange for proportional representation, stand aside for the Tories in a number of seats. Whilst Churchill was very sympathetic the Tory machine was sceptical that the Liberal leaders could deliver their voters to the Tories where they stepped aside. Indeed, Davies tried at the same time to raise the topic of electoral reform with Attlee. He also discussed potential arrangements with Churchill and Lord Woolton, Conservative Party chairman, but in his memorandum ahead of the meeting he stated unequivocally that 'The Liberal Party is and shall remain an independent party ... [there will be] no agreement with any other party which would jeopardise or weaken the Liberal Party.' He did not, though, rule out local pacts in particular constituencies.

The 1951 election reduced the number of Liberal MPs still further to six but it was the left-wing group who lost their seats. As a result, Davies's leadership was strengthened – indeed of the MPs elected in 1945, he was the only remaining one, albeit with more than two-thirds of the vote in his Montgomeryshire constituency. The party's centre of gravity had shifted to the right. This is

the context of Churchill's offer of a cabinet post – probably as Minister for Education – that Davies, on the advice of the Party Council (except, as alluded to above, Bonham Carter) turned down. The offer was very much a personal one to Davies from Churchill. Davies decided that he had to decline it. As Liberal historian Russell Deacon has concluded, declining the offer was the 'most important act by any Welsh Liberal to determine the party's future, (and) it was also perhaps the greatest act undertaken by any Liberal'.

Importantly, though, the Conservatives had won a majority; and the Liberal Parliamentary Party was able to be more cohesive and manageable than had been the case before – looking back until probably before the First World War. There was some electoral improvement, which first became evident at the Inverness by-election in December 1954, when the Liberals advanced to second place. Davies continued as leader into the 1955 general election, the first since 1929 in which the Liberals did not lose seats, and actually progressed in key seats such as North Devon (with Jeremy Thorpe as candidate), North Cornwall and Inverness. However, with Attlee and Churchill going, Davies now seemed a very old leader and he came under increasing pressure to retire. He announced his departure at the Liberal Assembly in

September 1956, and was succeeded by Grimond.

Davies was perhaps the only Liberal leader who could have maintained the party's independence. He was not particularly interested in general policy development but was adept at pursuing specific topics that he believed in strongly, including devolution, European integration, the National Health Service and House of Lords reform. Moreover, he remained passionately committed to the traditional Liberal values of individual liberty, reform, social justice, internationalism and public service. Turning down peerage offers on seventeen separate occasions, he resisted the temptation to seek an easier political life in the Lords. He was also active outside the UK, leading the Parliamentary Association for World Government, which he regarded as one of his main achievements, and for which, uniquely among Liberal leaders, he was, in 1955, nominated for, although not awarded, the Nobel Peace Prize.

Davies remained an MP until his death in 1962, when he was succeeded by Emlyn Hooson as MP for Montgomeryshire. ■

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