

Violet Bonham Carter (1887–1969)

Daughter of former Liberal Prime Minister H. H. Asquith from his first marriage, Violet Bonham Carter was at the centre of Liberal Party affairs from the 1906 election triumph onwards. She even lived to see the Liberal postwar by-election victories at Tarring and Orpington, the first since the run-up to the 1929 general election. Violet also kept a diary throughout her life. It provides a fascinating insight into Liberal Party politics, especially after the Second World War.

Bonham Carter is best known for sustaining the flame of her father's wing of the Liberals after the First World War, often in opposition to Megan Lloyd George, the Scylla to her Charybdis as Clement Davies described them. She was president of the Women's Liberal Federation during the Second World War and, in 1945, was the first woman to be president of the Liberal Party Organisation. Bonham Carter contested Wells in 1945 and, at Churchill's suggestion, Colne Valley in 1951, the latter without

Conservative opposition. In 1964, she received a life peerage.

Her diaries reveal her fervent arguing for Liberal values in support of the League of Nations and then the United Nations. Furthermore, Violet was an active supporter of anti-appeasement. An enthusiast for the European ideal, she became vice-chair of the United Europe Movement. As a frequent broadcaster on radio and television after the war, Bonham Carter was consistently anti-apartheid, pro the rights of Seretse Khama, opposed to Suez, and in favour of rebuilding relations with Germany.

In terms of the electoral and political survival of the Liberal Party, Bonham Carter was significant because she had been a long-term friend of Churchill – ever since he had been a member of her father's cabinet before the First World War. This gave her a close relationship with the leader of the Conservative Party after its huge defeat by Labour in the 1945 general election. The 1950 election result gave the Conservatives both the need and the opportunity for an electoral relationship with the Liberals that might lead to merger and therefore, perhaps, to the demise of that party. Despite a huge electoral effort contesting 475 seats, only nine Liberal MPs were returned. Although Bonham Carter's son-in-law, Grimond,

Violet Bonham Carter in 1933 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)



won Orkney & Shetland, Sinclair was defeated again in Caithness & Sutherland, and hardly any of the others were elected in three-way fights. Bonham Carter concluded that the party was finished. She therefore seized upon the mention by Churchill of the possibility that the Tories might support electoral reform. However, in the Conservative Party memo produced following her discussions with R. A. Butler, one of Churchill's key lieutenants, there was no mention of it. Butler was acutely aware that many Tories felt that the Liberal Party had no leverage and that their electoral travails offered an opportunity to destroy them once and for all. Many leading Liberals were suspicious of Bonham Carter's motives, and these feelings were only increased by her Colne Valley candidature in the 1951 election.

After the Conservatives' narrow victory in that election, Churchill offered Davies a cabinet post which he turned down. He also intimated that he would have offered a ministerial role (and presumably a peerage) to Bonham Carter. With Davies having turned the offer down, Bonham Carter felt she could not take any government role either. She confided to her diary that one seat in the cabinet and two under-secretaryships were on offer. 'I think poor Clem longed to accept. I shld have gone in unhesitatingly. (I'm told I shld have been offered Education.)'.

Leading Liberals, including Davies, Samuel and Grimond, as well as Bonham Carter, approached Churchill, now Conservative prime minister, in January 1953. The overture was greeted with the news that there was no prospect of a government inquiry into electoral reform. The dream of a loose anti-socialist coalition underpinned by an electoral system that enabled the parties to work together whilst remaining independent was over. Bonham Carter concluded that day's entry in her diary with 'cld it be concluded that it was the duty of one Party to die for the people? Surely if such a sacrifice was demanded others must make their contribution. It was for their contribution we had come to ask ... I had never had bright hopes. What alarms me is that the Tory Party shld still run so true to form.'

Any prospect of electoral reform from the Conservatives receded still further when Churchill's resignation as prime minister in April 1955 led to his replacement by Anthony Eden. Eden's decision to respond to Egypt's nationalisation of the Suez Canal by working with France and Israel (the latter secretly) to reoccupy the Canal Zone led to intense opposition from Bonham Carter and most Liberals. For Bonham Carter, her shame at the government's actions was compounded by the Soviet Union using them to distract attention from its brutal, profoundly illiberal repression

of Hungary. Like the brief Liberal electoral improvement in 1936 following Italy's invasion of Abyssinia, that of the late 1950s was influenced by a Conservative government whose party had turned out to be less liberal than its past political pronouncements had led many to believe. That first revival followed relatively near by-election misses in December 1954, in Inverness with John Bannerman and in Rochdale with Ludovic Kennedy. It culminated in the victory at Torrington in March 1958, aptly spearheaded by Mark Bonham Carter, Violet's son.

Violet Bonham Carter was a fascinating figure, and, thanks to her diaries, we know a surprising amount about her interior life. What is perhaps most remarkable is that, despite her tactical political choices (one might almost say missteps) – encouraged by her unique relationship with Churchill and driven by her desperation to save, in some shape or form, the party she loved – her innate liberalism ran through her public life with the consistency of the wording in a stick of rock. One of her final parliamentary acts was to take a leading role in the opposition in the Lords to the 1968 Commonwealth Immigration Bill, with its attempt to discriminate between those who were British citizens with a familial link to this country ('belongs in') and those Kenyan Asians whose British passports had been

conferred on them when Kenya became independent in 1963. There was a marathon debate in the Lords on 29 February 1968, which the Government won by

twenty-four votes, with both front benches in support, but all the Liberals, the bishops and many others against. As Bonham Carter wrote afterwards,

'I have never seen a more clear-cut line between the forces of Light & Darkness.' ■

Malcolm Baines

Megan Lloyd George (1902–66)

Born in Criccieth, north Wales, Megan was the third daughter and fifth child of future Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George and his wife, Margaret. Brought up largely in Wales, she replaced her sister, Mair, after the latter's premature death, as Lloyd George's favourite. Grimond described her in his memoirs as 'perpetually young, perpetually unfulfilled', and that captures some of her character. In part, this reflected her unique upbringing, initially at Number 11 and then at Number 10 Downing Street. Megan also spent considerable time abroad in Versailles, Canada, USA and India. Throughout it all, she was her father's confidante, central to his political life first as chancellor of the exchequer and then as prime minister. During her life she repeated the mantra, 'I am a Radical, as my father was.' Much more than Violet Bonham Carter, Megan Lloyd George remained in her father's shadow throughout her political career. Indeed, throughout the years when he was alive, Megan seems to have followed his political lead almost without thinking. However, whilst she had inherited his

charm, she had not his formidable capacity for hard work.

Megan won a contested selection for Anglesey, one of the few remaining safe Liberal seats, and was elected MP in the 1929 election. She followed her father in the hung parliament in moving towards some sort of arrangement with the minority Labour government. The Liberals, however, were very divided and, in the summer of 1931, the threat of an economic collapse led to the formation of a National Government. Lloyd George was recovering from an operation, so could be easily excluded by Baldwin and Ramsey MacDonald. Megan joined her father in Opposition once the new National Government decided a general election was necessary. She was re-elected comfortably in both the 1931 and 1935 elections. Samuel's defeat and replacement by Sinclair as Liberal leader in 1935 opened up the opportunity for the Lloyd George family MPs to rejoin the mainstream Liberal Party.

The later 1930s saw much foreign travel for Megan, including to Jamaica. Notoriously, she also visited Germany with her father

to see Hitler in 1936. In the same year she became the Labour MP, Philip Noel-Baker's, lover. Megan did not lead the struggle against appeasement, preferring to develop a career as a broadcasting MP, appearing on TV as early as April 1937. Perhaps inevitably, Megan's role in the Norway debate in May 1940 was to run to fetch her father when it was believed his intervention would have most impact. Herbert Morrison pestered Megan to persuade Lloyd George to take part. Churchill became prime minister but many of the chief appeasers remained in the government. Lloyd George refused to join but, in December 1940, the Liberal ambassador to the USA, Lord Lothian died. Lloyd George was asked to replace him and refused again. Halifax, the foreign secretary, was sent instead. The resulting reshuffle provided a chance for Megan to join the Ministry of Pensions as parliamentary secretary, the only government job, she was ever offered. However, because of her campaigning for equal workplace injury compensation treatment for men and women, Megan felt obliged to turn it down.