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**The political dynamics of north east Wales, with special reference to the Liberal Party, 1918-1935**

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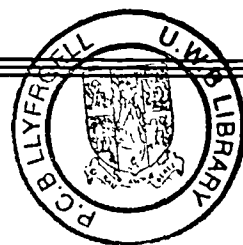
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*The Political Dynamics of North  
East Wales, with special reference to  
the Liberal Party, 1918-1935*

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## *Summary*

The decline of Liberalism as a political force during the inter-war period has conventionally been linked to the rise of class politics and the secularisation of society. However, such general theories cannot be applied to all British constituencies. This thesis argues that the decline of the Liberal Party was not necessarily inevitable. Using the socially and economically diverse region of North East Wales as a case study, it is asserted the Liberals were, to a large degree, the architects of their own destiny. Despite the fact Labour and the Conservatives attempted to oust them from their position of influence - whilst the Liberals were determined and acting in unison their competitors had little hope of overthrowing them. Class politics failed to matter to a party whose core values and beliefs were so deeply embedded in local society.

In North East Wales Liberal constituency parties remained relatively unaffected by the poison that had ravaged the Parliamentary party after 1916. Up until the 1930s these local associations managed to set their own agenda and possessed a large degree of autonomy. Nonetheless, the formation of the National Government brought local initiatives to an end, and truly introduced the spectre of national politics to their members. Liberalism as an ideology was stretched and altered into an almost unrecognisable creed. Even within the party it meant different things to different people. This thesis examines why Liberalism collapsed in an area of perceived Liberal 'strength', and considers the role of the opposing parties in this development. It thus addresses both the weakness of Labour in an era of 'class politics', and the growing strength of Conservative politics in North East Wales.

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## *Abbreviations*

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| DRO    | Denbighshire Record Office, Ruthin                  |
| FRO    | Flintshire Record Office, Flintshire                |
| HLRO   | House of Lords Records Office, London               |
| MFGB   | Miners' Federation of Great Britain                 |
| NLF    | National Liberal Federation                         |
| NLW    | National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth              |
| NWBCMA | North Wales and Border Counties Miners' Association |
| NWMA   | North Wales Miners' Association                     |
| PoRO   | Powys Record Office, Llandrindod Wells              |
| TUC    | Trade Union Congress                                |
| WEA    | Workers' Educational Association                    |



## *Introduction*

Much has been written about the demise of the Liberal party during the inter-war period. Conventionally its fortunes have been intrinsically linked to the rise of Labour and class politics. In the 1970s it was assumed that the secularisation of politics and the fading appeal of a pan-class party meant that the Liberals were at a disadvantage. Chris Cook argued that the British political system was not conducive to three strong parties. One would invariably be ousted and social changes suggested this would be the Liberals. In the aftermath of the Great War Labour's parliamentary advance was rapid. Following the election of 1924 the Liberals were no longer in a realistic position to vie for government.<sup>1</sup> This election heralded an important milestone for both parties – marking the rise of one and the fall of the other. Thus, Labour supplanted the Liberals and took over their mantle of progressivism and radicalism within the two party system. Ross McKibbin argued a similar line. The institutional strength of Labour, through trade unionism, eventually marginalised the Liberal party.<sup>2</sup> Moreover the enfranchisement of all working class men over the age of 21 years was a major contributory factor in the party's development. Matthew, McKibbin, and Kay have argued that Labour's increasing electoral presence was indicative of an emerging 'class consciousness' and a means of expressing political solidarity.<sup>3</sup>

After a decade of debate, counter-arguments were brought together and extended in Duncan Tanner's study of Labour's growth between 1900 and 1918. This suggested that class-based explanations could not be applied to Britain as a whole. He demonstrated that

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<sup>1</sup> C. Cook, *The age of alignment: Electoral politics in Britain, 1922-1929*, Bristol 1975.

<sup>2</sup> R. I. McKibbin, *The evolution of the Labour party 1910-1924*, Oxford 1974.

the country underwent a far more subtle and complex process of political change than depicted by earlier historians. The demise of Liberalism and the growth of Labour occurred gradually and evolved in an uneven pattern.<sup>4</sup> Even in mining areas rarely did the working class simply turn to Labour.<sup>5</sup> Cultural and practical considerations were just as important, if not more so, than occupational concerns. Mike Savage's study of Preston between 1880 and 1940 confirmed these trends. He argued that during this period 'working class political practices are not to be understood as umbilically linked to working class life'.<sup>6</sup> Savage saw the function, or role, of the individual within the 'community' as a major influence upon his or her political outlook. His distinction between 'formal' and 'practical' politics also illustrates the different levels on which politics operated, and reflected the varying demands of the electorate.

Both Tanner and Savage emphasized the importance of viewing the working classes as a socially diverse group, arguing that it has been the fundamental flaw of previous historical studies to depict them as a homogenous body. However, both studies were suggestive rather than conclusive as studies of inter-war Britain, Tanner looking briefly at the period between 1918 and 1924, and Savage looking only at Preston. Nonetheless in recent years the absence of class solidarity during this time of great political change has attracted much attention. Andrez Olechnowicz's examination of the Becontree housing estate in Essex during the inter-war years has highlighted the surprising lack of solidarity and unity that existed even within a large working class council estate.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that predominately 'Liberal' groups, like the National Council of Social Services, attempted to

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<sup>3</sup> H. C. G. Matthew, R. I. McKibbin & J. A. Kay, 'The franchise factor in the rise of the Labour party', English Historical Review, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> D. M. Tanner, Political change and the Labour party, 1900-1918, Cambridge 1990.

<sup>5</sup> D. M. Tanner, 'The Labour party and electoral politics in the coalfields' in A. Campbell, N. Fishman & D. Howell, Miners, unions and politics, 1910-47, Aldershot 1996.

<sup>6</sup> M. Savage, The dynamics of working class politics, Cambridge 1987, p.12.

foster a 'civic spirit' within the community, the estate was fragmented and possessed a clear social hierarchy.<sup>8</sup> Occupational and social diversity, and conflicting gender interests meant groups belonging to the same class had different and sometimes contrasting needs and priorities. This is most effectively illustrated when women's voting patterns are taken into consideration. Pamela Graves' study of 'Labour Women' between the wars has shown the reluctance of the Labour party to promote women's issues. Senior figures were anxious that the party would not be divided along gender lines. Moreover they were nervous of the reactions of male dominated trade unions, who were concerned that women's interests in areas like family allowances would adversely influence the male workforce.<sup>9</sup> However, as Mike Savage illustrates, the party rejected female issues at their peril. In his study the women of Preston did not obediently follow their husbands to the ballot box and vote Labour. Rather they were influenced by the other agents which encouraged their participation in the community – namely Anglicanism and the Conservative party.

Significantly the Conservatives viewed the female electorate in a different way to Labour. David Jarvis and Martin Pugh have both illustrated the way in which the Conservative party constructed and developed an agenda that would appeal to women. Driven in part by their apprehension of this newly enfranchised group's political reasoning and understanding, the party promoted policies that recognised conventional gender roles and pride in domesticity.<sup>10</sup> Growing recognition of a distinct 'gender gap' on voting behaviour – which benefited the Tories - has certainly helped those who argue that class politics did not dominate and dictate voting patterns. This attack on class politics has also been

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<sup>7</sup> A. Olechnowicz, Working class housing in England between the wars: The Becontree Estate, Oxford 1997.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> P. M. Graves, Labour women: Women in British working class politics, 1918-1939, Cambridge 1994.

<sup>10</sup> M. Pugh, Women and the women's movement in Britain, 1914-1999, Basingstoke, 2000. David Jarvis, 'The shaping of a Conservative electoral hegemony, 1918-1939' in M. Taylor & J. Lawrence, Party, state and society: Electoral behaviour in Britain since 1820, London 1997.

reinforced by historians who stress the way in which language can construct identities – and identities that cross party lines. This has been a significant development, although it is important to note that it builds on previous work. McKibbin’s work and that of Phillip Williamson come from very different backgrounds – yet both stress the power of politics to construct a cross-party (Conservative) appeal.<sup>11</sup> Indeed those who study inter-war politics are beginning to note that if a Labour-Tory alignment was created, this did not prevent the Liberals from faring especially well in certain parts of the country.<sup>12</sup> Dawson argues that in Devon and Cornwall the Liberals claimed to be the party of nation – as did the Conservatives and Labour elsewhere. All parties spoke the language not of class but of unity and nationhood.

Within Welsh history these newer approaches remained dormant until very recently.<sup>13</sup> Even the foremost authority on Welsh history, K. O. Morgan, assumed that by the mid 1920s the decline of the Liberal party was almost inevitable. His ‘reductionist’ thesis is persuasive.<sup>14</sup> The evaporation of Liberal support in the industrial South, and the fact that it remained strongest in the predominantly rural North, implied that those areas least affected by change tended to be more hostile to a new political creed – socialism. Whilst this may in part reflect the preoccupation of Welsh historians with the industrial South, even those who have examined the North and rural areas still regarded politics in class terms. Thus for Cyril Parry and David Pretty, Labour’s problems stemmed from the weakness of trade

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<sup>11</sup> R.I. McKibbin, The ideologies of class: Social relations in Britain, 1880-1950, Oxford 1990; & P. Williamson, Stanley Baldwin: A conservative leadership and national values, Cambridge 1999.

<sup>12</sup> B. M. Doyle, ‘Middle class realignment and party politics in Norwich’, University of East Anglia, unpublished Ph.D. thesis; & M. Dawson, ‘Liberalism in Devon and Cornwall 1910-31’, Historical Journal, vol. 38, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> The recent exception is D. M. Tanner, C. Williams & D. Hopkin (eds), The Labour Party in Wales, 1900-2000, Cardiff 2000.

<sup>14</sup> K. O. Morgan, Rebirth of a nation, 1880-1980, Oxford 1980.

unionism. By contrast, the Liberals survival was seen as an anachronistic consequence of limited social change.<sup>15</sup>

This thesis builds on conceptual changes in historical writing, taking North Wales as a case study of an area where the Liberals survived. Whilst recognising that social developments did not favour the Liberals, it stresses the party's capacity to adapt their brand of Liberalism to a changing electorate – and challenge both the Conservatives and Labour at their own game. Whilst the collapse of the Liberal party in Westminster and its organisational machinery at Abingdon Street was a problem, it will be argued in this thesis that the party had the capacity to do more than just 'survive' on a constituency level. This study shows that the devolved nature of the party structure and the patterns of activism at grassroots level meant that constituency parties had much control over their destiny. They frequently had little understanding or patience with directives from head office. Often their definition of Liberalism differed from the concept promoted by party officials in London. If the party could do this in Wales, with better leadership it may have been able to achieve this elsewhere. Thus, a study of the Liberals' survival in Wales is used to suggest that they had the political capacity to exploit the fact that 'class politics' did not determine its future. The party was demolished by people not by social change.

Whilst the four constituencies which are the focus of this thesis are not representative of the United Kingdom as a whole, their diversity implies that parallels may be drawn with many other divisions throughout the country. From the largely mining seat of Wrexham, to the rural constituency of Montgomeryshire and the more mixed divisions of Denbigh and Flintshire – the problems the Liberals encountered were varied, but also generic. Issues

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<sup>15</sup> Cyril Parry, The radical tradition in Welsh politics: A study of Liberal politics in Gwynedd, 1900-1920, Hull 1970; & David Pretty, The rural revolt that failed, Cardiff 1989.

such as economic fluctuations, demographic change, housing needs and the impact of recession, affected these 'types' of constituencies differently. The challenge to the local political parties was to react to these changes and understand society's new demands. That the Liberals did so quite successfully reinforces the idea that the party had the potential to perform well in a variety of contexts.

It will be argued in this study that the demise of the Liberal party was not inevitable. Rather its decline was part of an incremental process which not only reflected the changing nature of twentieth century politics, but was also caused by the party's own political misjudgement and mismanagement. From their headquarters at 21 Abingdon Street to the constituency parties nationwide, the Liberals were the architects of their own fate. By the outbreak of the Second World War the party was in a terminal state. Deeply divided and full of bitter recriminations, the chasms within were impossible to surmount. Liberalism as an ideology had been stretched and altered beyond recognition. By the late 1930s it meant different things to different people – and therein lay the problem. As Michael Freedon observed: 'The shocks that jolted liberalism also disclosed its anatomy, as hairline cracks widened into rifts that would not heal, and its edifice was revealed to contain ill-fitting sub-structures: 'liberalisms' that could not be reduced to 'liberalism''.<sup>16</sup> The implications of the dilemmas that were thrown up during the first part of the century had serious consequences. Whilst some Liberals were willing to compromise their party's intrinsic beliefs and values, others refused to make such sacrifices. The introduction of conscription, the formation of the Coalition, the General Strike, the existence of the Lloyd George political fund, and the National Government, all forced members to make difficult choices. All parties faced such dilemmas. Nonetheless the Conservatives and Labour had central

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<sup>16</sup> M. Freedon, Liberalism Divided, Oxford 1986, p.1.

leaderships that produced a central response. The varied reactions of all four Liberal constituency parties in this study typify responses nationwide. They highlight the fact that centrally the Liberal party offered little or no assistance to divisional organisations in their hour of need. Associations were left to their own devices, to muddle through the best they could. As a result some were more successful and resilient than others. Thus, if Liberalism remained a 'live' force in a given area it was more to do with local factors than national guidance.

The electoral performance of the Liberals in North East Wales shows that the party was still strong until the mid 1930s, and that it could cope with a variety of circumstances. Chapter 1 examines the nature of this diversity and the potential it had to influence the electorate. Population growth dictated the needs of the community in terms of health, housing and educational provision. The fact that Liberalism retained considerable support in constituencies that were undergoing change refutes, in part, theories that the party was marginalised because it was unable to cope with change. Particularly in Flintshire and Denbigh, where significant demographic change was witnessed, the Liberals demonstrated a capacity to adapt to a new and different political climate. Even in the mining area of Wrexham, the party continued to offer a robust challenge to Labour until the later 1930s. The party certainly built upon the cultural foundations that had once been its cornerstone – the Welsh language and Nonconformity. Yet it also recognised that these were no longer decisive factors that could secure electoral victory. They merely influenced outcomes. Only in rural Montgomeryshire could the Liberals afford to remain motionless, and not acknowledge society's evolving needs until the late 1920s. A combination of depopulation and the fragile state of their opposing parties meant that they were not punished for their complacency and inactivity.

The necessity of change was not fully appreciated in 1918, as shown in Chapter 2. Internal concerns dominated deliberations in the aftermath of the Great War. Even though the four divisional associations remained intact following the formation of the Coalition, a few voices of dissent were to be heard. Moreover conflict surfaced over contrasting styles of political management. In Flintshire, Denbigh and Montgomeryshire the paternalism of a bygone era continued to thrive. Local patronage and familial status were important considerations in the party's hierarchy, which dictated organisational matters and the selection of candidates. Thus, rank and file members were largely redundant. The importance of consultation and of the democratisation of party politics was yet to be fully appreciated. Until 1922 Liberal leaders held the false belief that their position was secure. The demise of the Coalition underlined their precarious standing. The results of the 1922, 1923 and 1924 contests demonstrated that the party would have to review and revise its strategy if it was to survive. On all three occasions the Liberals were unprepared, and failed to address the electorate's changing needs.

Chapter 3 outlines the nature of the renewed challenge posed by both the Conservatives and Labour in this region. Although nationally they were the dominant parties, in North East Wales they languished in the Liberals' shadow. In 1918 all Conservative associations conceded to Liberal Coalitionists, yet this was not necessarily a negative move for them. The early 1920s afforded them the opportunity to strengthen and organise their ranks and consolidate funds. They took advantage of the initiatives launched by Central Office in 1921 to improve the party's political standing in the constituencies. They quickly grasped the importance of identifying new groups of potential supporters. Whilst they already had an established electoral base, the widening of the franchise meant that they needed to target



female and working class voters in particular if they were to extend their political appeal. Their labours were not in vain. In Denbigh the party exceeded expectations with their performance in the three elections of the early 1920s. In Flintshire the Conservatives captured the seat in 1924. Whilst this was testimony to their ground work, it was also indicative of the Liberals' failure to modernise and compete.

Labour also projected a far more unified and cohesive front than the Liberals. In the immediate aftermath of the Great War it sought to establish its foundations in the industrial seats of Britain. The mining constituency of Wrexham was one area where they hoped to make an early breakthrough, although its favourable occupational composition did not inevitably mean its electorate had an appetite for socialism. On the contrary, the cultural values epitomised by Liberalism [namely the Welsh language and Nonconformity] were generally revered in Wrexham. Labour's first candidate in 1918, who emanated from a strong union background did not gain a considerable following. He was quickly replaced, and his successor, in 1922, possessed different qualities. He embodied the 'respectable' and professional characteristics which many Liberals held dear. Whilst personal qualities alone were not responsible for his victories in 1922 and 1923, his success was a major setback to the Liberals in the division.

Similar developments were occurring nationwide. The Liberals were fighting for their survival, which was graphically illustrated following the election of 1924. However their reversal of fortunes in 1924 did inspire party members, in the short term, to increase their efforts. Chapter 4 looks at how this was achieved on a national and local level. The greatest obstacles officials at Liberal headquarters had to overcome were the feuds and personal conflicts which continued to dog the party. Despite the fact that they were officially one

body, mutual suspicions within the Lloyd George and Asquith camps were still common. Internally the single most divisive and destructive issue was Lloyd George's political fund and the influence it was alleged to wield. Nonetheless whilst its presence exacerbated tensions it also financed the most significant and important Liberal initiatives of the inter-war period. It supported the endeavours of up-and-coming politicians, economists and academics to nurture and develop ideas that had been discussed at the Liberal Summer School. Indicative of the Summer School's members, the initiatives that were eventually produced were radical in nature and were warmly received in progressive and intellectual circles, particularly the recommendations to reform the economy and reduce unemployment. It was intended that they would be the basis of their next manifesto.

Nevertheless the ambitions of the Lloyd George wing and the party's London head office did not go completely to plan. Whilst they attempted to reinvigorate the party machinery, controversies over the General Strike and Lord Oxford's resignation raged. Moreover officials were also disturbed to learn in 1928, following an internal inquiry, that the majority of their constituency parties continued to be unmotivated and disillusioned.<sup>17</sup> However the impression gleaned in London was not necessarily accurate. Although it was assumed that the four divisions of North East Wales were part of the '300 stagnant seats' their inquiry referred to, this was not how the position was perceived in the region. The 1924 election had a far-reaching effect on the divisional parties here.<sup>18</sup> It encouraged all associations to evaluate their position and take a more active role in the community. This period also coincided with the appearance of three new Liberal candidates. The Flintshire party had been shaken by their defeat at the hands of the Conservatives, and even in the 'safe' seat of Denbigh the Tories had come within around a thousand votes of victory. As a

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<sup>17</sup> Harold Storey, 'Propaganda and Organisation', 27 April 1928, Lloyd George MS, G/31/3/17, HLRO.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

consequence the Liberal party in this region were desperate to rebuild. It is significant, though, that they failed to maximize the resources offered by headquarters. In some constituencies the ground breaking policy initiatives that had developed in time for the 1929 election were shunned. Whilst some candidates may not have fully appreciated their relevance, others were playing a tactical game. In Denbigh and Montgomeryshire the national party's land policy had proved unpopular. Thus little time was devoted to discussing its merits. Essentially, local divisional parties owed little of their continued success directly to 21 Abingdon Street. They had realised, independently, that they had to compete on the same terms as their opponents. It was they alone who had momentarily turned around their fortunes. Importantly, they did not believe their decline was irreversible. This hope and optimism kept them alive. Through their efforts they demonstrated that affection and support for the Liberal party was still apparent. Consequently when they were firing on all cylinders the opposition found it difficult to compete.

Neither Labour nor the Conservatives had anticipated the renewed efforts of the Liberals. Chapter 5 examines their reaction to this change, and the way in which they addressed the challenge. Both parties acted with characteristic caution, and firstly attempted to consolidate their existing support. They were aware of their weaknesses in the region. The North Wales Labour Council had given up hope, momentarily, on Montgomeryshire and Denbigh.<sup>19</sup> The conservative nature of rural society and the lack of occupational solidarity that existed amongst agricultural labourers made penetrating these constituencies very difficult. Their main targets in this region were Wrexham and Flintshire. The social deprivation witnessed in Wrexham during the later 1920s allowed Labour to demonstrate

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<sup>19</sup>North Wales Labour Council minutes, 15 March 1924, H. T. Edwards MS, C1, NLW.

its commitment to 'practical socialism'. Relief funds were set up in an attempt to raise awareness and money for the families of mine workers who lived in abject poverty due to the prolonged strike action and subsequent redundancies. Significantly in Flintshire the party did not occupy such a prominent role. The constituency's occupational diversity meant that the poverty witnessed in Wrexham was not replicated to the same degree. Moreover, whilst the division's Liberal association continued to champion the needs of the working classes, Labour was marginalised. Nonetheless Labour's efforts were rewarded. In Flintshire Labour's share of the vote increased in 1929, whilst it regained Wrexham.

The Conservatives also continued to be an active and motivated force in the region. However by the late 1920s their position was not as strong as it had been during the early 1920s. Financial difficulties and problems with their candidates arose during the latter part of the decade. In Wrexham and Montgomeryshire the parties were unable to sustain themselves. They were reliant on the generous donations of a small group of elderly members to keep them solvent. In Denbigh the premature death of their long standing candidate a few months prior to the 1929 election was attributed to their lacklustre performance, whilst in Flintshire the incumbent Tory MP could not compete with the appeal of the Liberals' new candidate. The party's failure to improve its position during the late 1920s illustrates that efficient and strategic organisation could only get a party so far. The Liberals' performance in 1929 proved that only through organisation and an affinity with society's values could success be assumed. Thus, in order to oust the Liberals their opponents would also have to weave themselves into the community's cultural heart. This was not an easy task.

Had the Liberal party maintained their efforts and unity during the years following the 1929 election they may have retained their hold over North East Wales for a longer period. During the mid to late 1920s they had demonstrated a capacity to adapt their brand of politics. Nevertheless the impact of national politics (which could not be ignored given their magnitude) was to devastate the party at a local level. Although the four divisional associations had managed to keep a united front during the Coalition years, the formation of the National Government was a step too far. Both nationally and locally what 'Liberalism' meant became unclear. The issue of Free Trade – one of the party's central tenets – became a contentious matter. Whilst some were willing to sacrifice principle for the good of the country, others felt embittered over this betrayal. In North East Wales constituency parties fragmented and splintered. Local parties did not benefit from credible 'national' reaffirmations of Liberal principle. In Montgomeryshire, Denbigh and Flintshire Liberal MPs who supported the government battled with factions within their parties. Liberal was pitted against Liberal; as a consequence constituency and organisational matters were demoted. By 1935 the rival factions could not be reconciled. Thus, a vacuum of power was allowed to develop.

Labour and the Conservatives capitalised upon the Liberals' misfortunes, as they had done previously between 1918 and 1924. The disintegration of the party that had dominated the region's political landscape for such a long time was an opportunity its rivals could ill afford to miss. Although they too continued to endure financial difficulties, their troubles were trivial in comparison to those dogging the Liberals. The Conservatives were the main beneficiaries of this political turmoil. In Westminster the party dominated the National Government. In the constituencies pro-government supporters received the endorsement of a grateful electorate. Whilst Liberalism remained strong during the 1930s in those areas

that had not undergone dramatic change. In seats that had experienced significant development loyalties were more tenuous. This was most evidently the case in Flintshire. By 1935 the cultural pull of the party was insufficient to ensure Liberal success, and the party's adaptation had ended. The economic prosperity brought about by the government's policies saw the electorate voting with their heads – not their hearts. Thus, a Conservative was elected in 1935. The Liberals would never again experience parliamentary success. In Wrexham it was Labour that made the breakthrough. In contrast to the Tories in Flintshire, they recaptured the seat because they had finally replaced the Liberal party in the voters' affections. This was an even stronger tie, which truly underlined the Liberals' demise.

The Liberals allowed both parties to fill a position that they had once dominated. As the 1930s progressed the Labour and Tory parties continued to assume greater authority – mirroring national trends. Within a short space of time the political practices of North East Wales – like many other regions nationwide – had evolved from the parochial paternalism of a bygone era to a modern arena which thrived on national events. Had the Liberals remained a united force their fight would have continued – however as constituency parties became entangled in national quarrels their fate was sealed. Ultimately they were the architects of their own fate.

# *Chapter 1*

## *The Social and Economic Dynamics of North East Wales, 1901-1939*

During the inter-war period North Wales was viewed as one of the Liberal party's last bastions. To a large extent this is true. Table 1.1 illustrates the party's strength in the region. Between 1918 and 1935 of 21 electoral contests, the Liberals were victorious in 15.<sup>1</sup> Like the North of Scotland and Devon and Cornwall, this region remained loyal to the party at a time when many other British constituencies had altered their allegiances. There has been a tendency to attribute the Liberals' success to the modest social and economic changes which took place in these regions during the inter-war period. It has been argued that the continuity of their social character, in terms of cultural and religious values, prevented the steep decline that the party experienced elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> In Wales the linguistic dimension has also been seen as a contributory factor to the party's survival: the Liberals were seen as the party of 'Welshness'. Studies of Liberal politics in the 1918-1924 period seem to regard areas of Liberal success as oddities, linked by little more than distance from London, with success in industrial areas attributed to 'strong candidates'.<sup>3</sup> The implication of more recent work have still to be applied to Liberalism after 1918. In his national study of the growth of Labour between 1900 and 1918 Duncan Tanner shows that in constituencies throughout the country, the emergence of Labour was as slow as the decline of Liberalism and was neither inevitable nor the simple product of socio-economic change. His references to the capacity of Liberalism to survive at constituency level<sup>4</sup> have subsequently been extended in works which show the slow progress of Labour even in mining areas.<sup>5</sup> If Liberalism was doomed by socio-economic change, it is strange that it

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<sup>1</sup> These statistics do not take into account unopposed contests.

<sup>2</sup> Many leading Welsh historians such as K. O. Morgan have advanced this argument.

<sup>3</sup> T. Wilson, *The downfall of the Liberal party, 1914-1935*, London 1966. K. O. Morgan, *The rebirth of a nation, Wales 1880-1980*, Oxford 1980.

<sup>4</sup> D. M. Tanner, *Political change and the Labour party, 1900-1918*, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 284-313.

<sup>5</sup> D. M. Tanner, 'The Labour party and electoral politics in the coalfields' in Campbell. A; N. Fishman & D. Howell, *Miners, Unions and Politics, 1910-1947*, Aldershot 1996.

lasted so long and retained such support, not just in the rural ‘Celtic fringe’ but across industrial Britain.

Table 1.1

*The electoral performance of the Liberal party in North East Wales, 1918-1935*

| <i>Contest</i> | <i>Seat</i>     | <i>Party</i>    | <i>% of vote</i> | <i>Actual Poll</i> |       |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------------|-------|
| 1918           | Montgomeryshire | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>Unopposed</b> | -                  |       |
|                | Flintshire      | <b>C. Lib</b>   | <b>Unopposed</b> | -                  |       |
|                | Denbigh         | <b>C. Lib</b>   | <b>83.3</b>      | 14773              |       |
|                |                 | Lab             | 16.7             | 2958               |       |
|                | Wrexham         | <b>C. Lib</b>   | <b>76.3</b>      | 20874              |       |
|                |                 | Lab             | 23.7             | 6500               |       |
| 1922           | Montgomeryshire | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>Unopposed</b> | -                  |       |
|                | Flintshire      | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>44.2</b>      | 16854              |       |
|                |                 | Con             | 39.6             | 15080              |       |
|                |                 | Lab             | 16.2             | 6163               |       |
|                | Denbigh         | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>53.9</b>      | 12975              |       |
|                |                 | Con             | 37.9             | 9138               |       |
|                |                 | Ind. Lib        | 8.2              | 1974               |       |
|                | Wrexham         | <b>Lab</b>      | <b>35.8</b>      | 11940              |       |
|                |                 | Lib             | 32.6             | 10842              |       |
|                |                 | Con             | 31.6             | 10508              |       |
|                | 1923            | Montgomeryshire | <b>Lib</b>       | <b>Unopposed</b>   | -     |
|                |                 | Flintshire      | <b>Lib</b>       | <b>56.8</b>        | 19609 |
| Con            |                 |                 | 43.2             | 14926              |       |
| Denbigh        |                 | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>59.8</b>      | 12164              |       |
|                |                 | Con             | 40.2             | 8186               |       |
| Wrexham        |                 | <b>Lab</b>      | <b>39.0</b>      | 12918              |       |
|                |                 | Lib             | 33.4             | 11037              |       |
|                |                 | Con             | 27.6             | 9131               |       |
| 1924           |                 | Montgomeryshire | <b>Lib</b>       | <b>77.3</b>        | 14942 |
|                |                 |                 | Lab              | 22.7               | 4384  |
|                |                 | Flintshire      | <b>Con</b>       | <b>46.4</b>        | 19054 |
|                |                 |                 | Lib              | 34.5               | 14169 |
|                | Lab             |                 | 19.1             | 7821               |       |
|                | Denbigh         | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>53.0</b>      | 12671              |       |
|                |                 | Con             | 47.0             | 11250              |       |
|                |                 | Lib             | 44.4             | 15291              |       |
|                | Wrexham         | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>55.6</b>      | 19154              |       |
|                |                 | Con             | 44.4             | 15291              |       |
|                |                 | Lib             | 46.5             | 12779              |       |
|                | 1929            | Montgomeryshire | <b>Lib</b>       | <b>46.5</b>        | 12779 |
| Con            |                 |                 | 38.7             | 10651              |       |
| Lab            |                 |                 | 14.8             | 4069               |       |
| Flintshire     |                 | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>43.0</b>      | 24012              |       |
|                |                 | Con             | 35.0             | 19536              |       |
|                |                 | Lab             | 22.0             | 12310              |       |
| Denbigh        |                 | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>61.9</b>      | 21305              |       |
|                |                 | Con             | 38.1             | 13116              |       |
|                |                 | Lab             | 46.4             | 20584              |       |
| Wrexham        |                 | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>52.1</b>      | 22474              |       |
|                |                 | Lab             | 47.9             | 20653              |       |
|                |                 | Con             | 22.1             | 9820               |       |
| 1931           | Montgomeryshire | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>Unopposed</b> | -                  |       |
|                | Flintshire      | <b>Nat. Lib</b> | <b>71.4</b>      | 40405              |       |
|                |                 | Lab             | 28.6             | 16158              |       |
|                | Denbigh         | <b>Nat. Lib</b> | <b>Unopposed</b> | -                  |       |
|                | Wrexham         | <b>Lib</b>      | <b>52.1</b>      | 22474              |       |
|                |                 | Lab             | 47.9             | 20653              |       |
| 1935           | Montgomeryshire | <b>Nat. Lib</b> | <b>Unopposed</b> | -                  |       |
|                | Flintshire      | <b>Nat. Con</b> | <b>44.9</b>      | 26644              |       |
|                |                 | Lib             | 27.9             | 16536              |       |
|                |                 | Lab             | 27.2             | 16131              |       |
|                | Denbigh         | <b>Nat. Lib</b> | <b>50.1</b>      | 17372              |       |
|                |                 | Lib             | 35.6             | 12329              |       |
|                |                 | Lab             | 14.3             | 4963               |       |
|                | Wrexham         | <b>Lab</b>      | <b>56.3</b>      | 23650              |       |
|                |                 | Lib             | 43.7             | 18367              |       |

Source: F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, Glasgow 1969  
Successful party in bold.



Tanner's work also hints at two further relevant points. Firstly, whilst the historiography of the Liberals, electoral fortunes assumes a class divide reflecting class-based cultural considerations, in reality class politics was never that dominant and single class constituencies were not the norm. Thus, the gradual failure of Liberalism to hold mining seats (for example) although significant in determining Labour's breakthrough, does not indicate what would 'inevitably' happen elsewhere. The electoral map of Britain contained a huge number of mixed seats which were not dominated by heavy industry and which remained open to electoral competition. Secondly, Tanner's work (like that of Savage) is unusual in noting the significance of changes in the social and economic structure of constituencies across the inter-war period – changes which were not necessarily favourable to Labour. The growth of council housing estates and of upwardly mobile voters in the 1920s were not changes which automatically benefited Labour. Indeed, as Savage has shown, they could benefit the Tories. This reinforces a point made by other historians, including Cook, that it was the Tories as well as Labour who were the Liberals' rivals – and in some areas a more significant rival.

If this body of scholarship suggests a less rigid approach to the role of socio-economic factors in determining a party's fate, two conceptual changes reinforce this point. The first is the political scientists' emphasis on a broader range of 'new' variables and their influence on voting behaviour. Rather than seeing class and religion as the key variables, they suggest influences such as home ownership were significant. The second development is the 'new' emphasis on the capacity of politics to 'construct' support. If this is the case, then 'reading' political changes from social trends is more suspect than ever. This chapter builds on these developments. It examines the Liberals' fortunes in a range of seats, from the largely mining constituency of Wrexham to the largely rural seat of Montgomeryshire, by way of two more mixed seats – Flintshire and Denbigh. It is not argued that these are

'typical' of the United Kingdom, but they represent a series of opportunities and challenges which potentially influenced the Liberals' position. The Liberals' response to these evolving challenges was important. It is necessary to examine whether political parties were equipped to act as the medium for constructing political allegiances, as poststructuralists imply and not just assume that a national discourse dictated electoral alignments. Of significance to this study is the extent to which local, political, organisations and associations reacted to new changes, acknowledging the evolving nature of their division, or followed the same strategic course throughout the inter war period. Moreover how did parties respond to the conditions facing the electorate, such as unemployment, and were they either rewarded or punished for their actions? The emphasis in this chapter is thus to map out the landscape of politics, the arena in which politics was fought and the conditions which influenced how voters might perceive competing political approaches.

The most likely influence on a constituency's political character is its social and occupational infrastructure. However the circumstances that influence voters from those assumed to be significant by historians need to be identified and separated. Demographic and economic change can reveal much about an area. These factors determine the pace of social change. Moreover they dictate the needs of a community in terms of health, housing and educational provision. Cultural and linguistic factors are also influential. Welsh culture created a distinct set of issues to address and a different way of seeing the world. Conventionally the Liberal party has been portrayed as the 'losers' in divisions that experienced dramatic change.<sup>6</sup> The erosion of the Welsh language and Nonconformity, traditionally associated with Liberal strength, was endemic in most districts of North East Wales during this time. Yet despite such decline, even in the region's most industrialised seats the Liberal party continued to thrive at least until 1931. It is clearly important to look

at more than just linguistic and religious data, and in the latter case to appreciate how and why religious affinity might influence attitudes. Looking at the density of Nonconformity in a seat – as Kinnear does – tells us little about the electoral significance of a culture.<sup>7</sup>

### Economic and demographic change

Between 1911 and 1931 the demographic changes witnessed in North Wales were seemingly unremarkable when compared to the nineteenth century. The latter half of the nineteenth century had seen significant population increases in counties like Caernarvon and Merioneth. During the twentieth century progress was not as marked, with the majority of counties encountering minimal change, or indeed population decline (as tables 1.2 and 1.3 indicate).

Table 1.2

The Population of North Wales, 1851-1931

| County     | 1851   | 1861    | 1871    | 1881    | 1891*   | 1901    | 1911    | 1921    | 1931    |
|------------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Anglesey   | 57,327 | 54,609  | 51,040  | 51,416  | 50,098  | 50,606  | 50,928  | 51,744  | 49,029  |
| Caernarvon | 87,870 | 95,694  | 106,282 | 119,349 | 115,886 | 123,481 | 122,588 | 128,183 | 120,829 |
| Denbigh    | 92,583 | 100,778 | 104,941 | 111,740 | 118,843 | 131,582 | 154,842 | 157,634 | 157,648 |
| Flint      | 68,156 | 69,737  | 76,312  | 80,587  | 77,041  | 81,485  | 92,705  | 106,617 | 112,889 |
| Merioneth  | 38,843 | 38,963  | 46,598  | 52,038  | 48,859  | 48,852  | 45,565  | 45,087  | 43,201  |
| Montgomery | 67,335 | 66,919  | 67,623  | 65,718  | 58,003  | 54,901  | 53,146  | 51,263  | 48,473  |

\* Prior to 1891 population statistics related to the number of people living in the 'ancient' county. This changed in 1891 to be based on inhabitants in the 'administrative' county.  
Source: Census Reports, 1861-1931.

Table 1.3

The Population of North Wales, 1851-1931: Intercensal change

| County     | 1851 | 1861 | 1871 | 1881 | 1891  | 1901 | 1911 | 1921 | 1931 |
|------------|------|------|------|------|-------|------|------|------|------|
| Anglesey   | 12.6 | -4.7 | -6.5 | 0.7  | -2.6  | 1.0  | 0.6  | 1.6  | -5.2 |
| Caernarvon | 8.4  | 8.9  | 11.1 | 12.3 | 1.0   | 6.6  | 0.7  | 4.6  | 5.7  |
| Denbigh    | 4.6  | 8.9  | 4.1  | 6.3  | 5.5   | 10.7 | 10.0 | 7.0  | 1.8  |
| Flint      | 1.8  | 2.3  | 9.4  | 5.6  | -3.9  | 5.8  | 13.8 | 15.0 | 5.9  |
| Merioneth  | -1.2 | 0.3  | 19.6 | 11.7 | -5.3  | 0.0  | 6.7  | 1.0  | 4.2  |
| Montgomery | -3.3 | -0.6 | 1.1  | -2.8 | -11.7 | -5.3 | -3.2 | -3.5 | -5.4 |

Source: Census Reports, 1861-1931.

<sup>6</sup> This is true in areas like South Wales, where the Liberal party was overtaken by Labour.

<sup>7</sup> M. Kinnear, The British Voter, London 1981.

The greatest demographic growth during the early twentieth century occurred in North East Wales. Whilst the population of Anglesey and Caernarvon remained stagnant between 1901 and 1931 and the population of Merioneth and Montgomeryshire actually declined, in Flintshire and Denbighshire there was a significant increase. Thus it was in these latter counties that the Liberals had to consider the needs of a new electorate, and balance them with the demands of the established voters. Few studies pay sufficient attention to the development of new neighbourhoods and the influence of incomers to constituencies, yet this is vital in examining Flintshire and Denbigh.<sup>8</sup> In general it was the rural areas, with the exception of Flintshire, that endured the greatest decline. Urban districts grew at a far more rapid pace.

The growth witnessed in Flintshire and Denbighshire's urban areas cannot simply be attributed to industrial advance. Table 1.4 shows that the areas of highest population increase were largely those where a new residential population was developing, like Prestatyn, Flint and Connah's Quay. However tables 1.5 and 1.6 show that this does not mean professional or service industries dominated. In neither county did a particular industry hold a primary position.

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<sup>8</sup> Andrez Olechnowicz's work on the Becontree estate in Essex during the inter-war period has shown the way in which the expectations and needs of neighbourhoods changed (A. Olechnowicz, Working-class housing in England, 1918-1939, Oxford 1997)

Table 1.4

*Demographic changes in North East Wales, 1901-1931 (percentage)*

| County                 | District/ Borough           | 1901-1911     | 1911-1921 | 1921-1931 | 1911-1931 |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|                        |                             | % Change      |           |           |           |
| <i>Denbighshire</i>    | Abergele & Pensarn UD       | 1.8           | 24.1      | 0.7       | 24.9      |
|                        | Colwyn Bay UD               | 45.4          | 48.6      | 11.2      | 140.4     |
|                        | Denbigh MB                  | 7.1           | -1.6      | 6.9       | 5.2       |
|                        | Llangollen UD               | -1.6          | 13.2      | -20.2     | -9.6      |
|                        | Llanrwst UD                 | -4.8          | -6        | 0.2       | -5.8      |
|                        | Ruthin MB                   | 6.9           | -2        | 5.2       | 3.1       |
|                        | Wrexham MB                  | 22.8          | 1.8       | -0.7      | 1         |
|                        | Chirk RD                    | 1.7           | 0.9       | 6.1       | 7         |
|                        | *Glan Conwy                 | 12.6          | 1         | 7.5       | 8.6       |
|                        | Llangollen RD               | 2.5           | 4.7       | -8.3      | -4        |
|                        | Llanrwst RD                 | -4.1          | -1.6      | -5        | -6.5      |
|                        | Llansilin RD                | -0.2          | -8.4      | -7.1      | -14.8     |
|                        | Ruthin RD                   | -1            | 2.3       | -1.7      | 0.6       |
|                        | St. Asaph RD                | -2.9          | 2.3       | 5.1       | 7.5       |
|                        | Uwchaled RD                 | 0.5           | -4.2      | -8.4      | -12.3     |
|                        | Wrexham RD                  | 10            | 4.6       | 2         | 6.7       |
|                        | <i>Flintshire</i>           | Buckley UD    | 9.6       | 6.2       | 2.6       |
| Flint MB               |                             | 18.3          | 15.1      | 21.5      | 39.9      |
| Connah's Quay UD       |                             | 35.3          | 10.1      | 18.2      | 30.1      |
| Holywell UD            |                             | -3.9          | 14.1      | 17.7      | 34.3      |
| Mold UD                |                             | 14.3          | -4.4      | 10.3      | 5.4       |
| Prestatyn UD           |                             | 61.5          | 100.5     | 10.5      | 121.6     |
| Rhyl UD                |                             | 6.3           | 49.8      | 0         | 49.8      |
| Hawarden RD            |                             | 30            | 16.8      | 10.6      | 29.2      |
| Holywell RD            |                             | 5.5           | 3         | 2.3       | 5.5       |
| Overton RD             |                             | 2.3           | -1.4      | -6.7      | -8        |
| St. Asaph              |                             | 9.9           | 20.6      | -5        | 14.6      |
| <i>Montgomeryshire</i> |                             | Llanfyllin MB | 0.0       | -3.3      | -8.2      |
|                        | Llanidloes MB               | 6.4           | -2.9      | -6.5      | -9.2      |
|                        | Machynlleth UD              | -4.6          | -3.9      | 1.2       | -2.7      |
|                        | Montgomery MB               | -4.9          | -3        | -3.8      | -6.6      |
|                        | Newtown & Llanllwchaiarn UD | -6.6          | -6.6      | -9        | -15.1     |
|                        | Welshpool MB                | -3.3          | -4        | -0.8      | -4.7      |
|                        | Fornden RD                  | 0.0           | -1.7      | -6.4      | -8        |
|                        | Llanfyllin RD               | -2.4          | -2.9      | -3.5      | -6.2      |
|                        | Machynlleth RD              | -5.2          | -5.3      | -7.3      | -12.2     |
|                        | Newtown & Llanidloes RD     | -1.8          | -2.9      | -7.6      | -10.3     |

Source: Census reports, 1901-1931.

Although Denbighshire was primarily a rural county, it possessed a diverse occupational structure. Only in the districts that comprised much of the Wrexham constituency did heavy industry feature, yet these were also amongst the county's most populous districts where, between 1911 and 1921, a substantial increase was witnessed in the extractive industries. The occupational profile of Denbighshire reveals that in Wrexham and Chirk

coal mining provided the largest source of employment. In these districts around half of all men of working age were employed in this industry, compared to the county average of around thirty per cent. Elsewhere agriculture dominated. Table 1.5 illustrates this point:

Table 1.5

*Denbighshire: Percentage of the most popular male \*occupations, 1911-1931*

| <i>District</i>       | <i>1911**</i>      |                         |                              | <i>1921</i>        |               |                              | <i>1931</i>        |               |                              |
|-----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|------------------------------|
|                       | <i>Agriculture</i> | <i>Mining Quarrying</i> | <i>Distributive/Commerce</i> | <i>Agriculture</i> | <i>Mining</i> | <i>Distributive/Commerce</i> | <i>Agriculture</i> | <i>Mining</i> | <i>Distributive Commerce</i> |
| Abergele & Pensarn UD | -                  | -                       | -                            | 9.0                | 1.9           | 21.5                         | 6.3                | 3.5           | 18.5                         |
| Colwyn Bay UD         | 8.6                | 1.3                     | 1.7                          | 8.2                | 1.3           | 27.7                         | 5.9                | 5.8           | 21.7                         |
| Denbigh MB            | 18.2               | 1.5                     | 1.2                          | 21.4               | 1.9           | 16.7                         | 16.0               | 1.6           | 17.7                         |
| Llangollen UD         | -                  | -                       | -                            | 12.2               | 0             | 18.6                         | 10.5               | 1.3           | 18.7                         |
| Llanrwst UD           | -                  | -                       | -                            | 8.7                | 4.1           | 19.3                         | 7.6                | 3.7           | 21.2                         |
| Ruthin MB             | -                  | -                       | -                            | 12.1               | 1.7           | 20.1                         | 9.0                | 2.9           | 19.6                         |
| Wrexham MB            | 3.1                | 10.2                    | 2.4                          | 2.1                | 16.6          | 15.9                         | 1.1                | 19.7          | 18.6                         |
| Chirk RD              | -                  | -                       | -                            | 21.3               | 41.6          | 6.0                          | 18.1               | 49.5          | 6.3                          |
| Glan Conwy            | -                  | -                       | -                            | 57.0               | 1.4           | 5.5                          | 48.8               | 0             | 7.7                          |
| Llangollen RD         | -                  | -                       | -                            | 28.5               | 22.5          | 6.7                          | 28.3               | 22.8          | 5.3                          |
| Llanrwst RD           | -                  | -                       | -                            | 70.8               | 1.8           | 3.1                          | 62.6               | 2.4           | 3.6                          |
| Llansilin RD          | -                  | -                       | -                            | 64.0               | 5.1           | 3.6                          | 61.5               | 4.9           | 4.4                          |
| Ruthin RD             | -                  | -                       | -                            | 65.7               | 4.8           | 5.1                          | 60.0               | 6.2           | 5.3                          |
| St. Asaph RD          | -                  | -                       | -                            | 63.9               | 4.0           | 4.4                          | 53.7               | 15.1          | 6.0                          |
| Uwchaled RD           | -                  | -                       | -                            | 59.9               | 0             | 3.8                          | 67.0               | 1.3           | 4.3                          |
| Wrexham RD            | -                  | -                       | -                            | 8.9                | 50.4          | 6.5                          | 8.8                | 48.7          | 7.6                          |
| Other Urban Districts | 10.7               | 2.4                     | 1.8                          | -                  | -             | -                            | -                  | -             | -                            |
| Other Rural Districts | 27.8               | 34.2                    | 1.0                          | -                  | -             | -                            | -                  | -             | -                            |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>21.7</b>        | <b>25.3</b>             | <b>1.3</b>                   | <b>19.8</b>        | <b>26.8</b>   | <b>10.5</b>                  | <b>18.0</b>        | <b>27.2</b>   | <b>11.0</b>                  |

Source: Census reports, 1911-1931

\* Whilst agriculture, mining and commerce were the most popular occupations overall in Denbighshire during this period some districts, like Colwyn Bay, deviated from this trend. Here the food and drink industry also played a significant role its economic make-up.

\*\* Occupational breakdowns were only given for districts with populations exceeding 5,000 in 1911

A similar dichotomy between industry and agriculture was emerging in Flintshire. Here no one industry dominated. Table 1.6 highlights the county's economic diversity. Industry was developing at a rapid pace. This was particularly evident in Flint and Connah's Quay between 1921 and 1931, due to the expansion of the steel and textile industries. Agriculture was also holding its own, occupying around 15 per cent of workers. Whereas the North Wales Miners Association had a strong voice in Wrexham, in Flintshire it was severely diluted. This was not a 'natural' Labour seat, but it had to win seats like this if it was to become a party of government.

Table 1.6

*Flintshire: Percentage of the most popular male \*occupations, 1911-1931*

| District              | 1911        |             |                           | 1921        |             |                           | 1931        |             |                           |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------------------|
|                       | Agriculture | Industry    | Distributive/<br>Commerce | Agriculture | Industry    | Distributive/<br>Commerce | Agriculture | Industry    | Distributive/<br>Commerce |
| Buckley UD            | 4.1         | 63.3        | 1.3                       | 3.1         | 53.4        | 7.5                       | 3.1         | 48.3        | 8.8                       |
| Connah's Quay UD      | -           | -           | -                         | 6.2         | 36.4        | 9.7                       | 7.6         | 48.2        | 14.6                      |
| Flint MB              | 8.6         | 28.3        | 1.7                       | 5.9         | 28.1        | 8.1                       | 5.2         | 60.7        | 9.6                       |
| Holywell UD           | -           | -           | -                         | 4.2         | 24.6        | 16.0                      | 5.0         | 28          | 16.3                      |
| Mold UD               | -           | -           | -                         | 3.6         | 33.1        | 16.6                      | 2.6         | 31.2        | 18.7                      |
| Prestatyn UD          | -           | -           | -                         | 7.6         | 7.3         | 34.8                      | 5.6         | 0           | 23.6                      |
| Rhyl UD               | 3.6         | 0           | 2.5                       | 4.6         | 9.2         | 28.2                      | 2.7         | 1.3         | 23.7                      |
| Hawarden RD           | -           | -           | -                         | 11.3        | 38.2        | 7.1                       | 12.8        | 33.2        | 9.3                       |
| Holywell RD           | -           | -           | -                         | 23.1        | 38.0        | 6.2                       | 22.4        | 39.3        | 9.6                       |
| Overton RD            | -           | -           | -                         | 60.0        | 6.9         | 5.2                       | 59.0        | 4.8         | 6.0                       |
| St Asaph RD           | -           | -           | -                         | 30.7        | 11.3        | 7.9                       | 27.8        | 4.0         | 13.7                      |
| Other Urban Districts | 5.1         | 38.4        | 2.0                       | -           | -           | -                         | -           | -           | -                         |
| Other Rural Districts | 24.5        | 27.5        | 1.1                       | -           | -           | -                         | -           | -           | -                         |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>17</b>   | <b>31.9</b> | <b>1.4</b>                | <b>15.6</b> | <b>31.7</b> | <b>10.9</b>               | <b>14.9</b> | <b>30.7</b> | <b>12.0</b>               |

Source: Census reports, 1911-1931

\* Most popular industries: Mining &amp; quarrying; Ceramics, glass &amp; cement, Textiles; Metal manufacture.

Nonetheless, Flintshire's steady growth masks its evolving economic character. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century agriculture, along with coal and lead mining dominated. Gradually, though, these industries receded and gave way to others. The first decades of the twentieth century were a time of great change in Flintshire. Agriculture was slowly declining. By the 1930s it was consigned to the county's most rural extremities, especially St. Asaph and Overton. The demise of the lead mines in the Mold area was even swifter. Having been one of Britain's leading producers of the ore, it rapidly lost its share of the market. Nonetheless coal mining remained a popular occupation throughout this period. Although the impact of the inter-war depression ensured mining was never to flourish as it had done a century earlier, to a large extent an air of hopelessness embraced colliery workers and owners. Coal was becoming harder to extract as many of the area's richest seams had been harvested. By the early 1900s, Flintshire's coalfield was concentrated in a small area between the towns of Flint and Prestatyn. The most important of these collieries were Bettisfield, Englefield and Point of Ayr. All of these were in

decline. Miners in Flintshire were not as secure as their counterparts in Denbighshire. Yet in contrast to the South Wales coalfield the area's exports were negligible – almost exclusively servicing a local market.<sup>9</sup>

The development of steel production and textile manufacture revived Flintshire's flagging economy. By 1911 the newly established John Summers steel company employed over 3,000 men, a figure that had more than doubled by the outbreak of the Second World War, making it the county's largest employer. The second largest employer was the textile firm Courtaulds, manufacturers of synthetic fabrics. By 1936 the company had opened four factories in the Holywell and Flint area and employed in excess of 6,800 workers.<sup>10</sup> The emergence of these new industries provided attractive employment opportunities, which drew both native Flintshire inhabitants and those from other, often neighbouring, English and Welsh counties. It is significant that even by 1911 only 65 per cent of the county's inhabitants had been born within the boundaries of Flintshire.<sup>11</sup> Yet the growth of heavy industry alone cannot explain the increase in population that was witnessed between 1911 and 1931. Whilst the districts that were undergoing the greatest industrial development grew in size (Flint, Connah's Quay, Holywell and Hawarden) the most dramatic changes in Flintshire and Denbighshire was reserved for the coastal areas. In 1926 Colwyn Bay's medical officer of health, William McKendrick, described the town's evolving nature:

'Colwyn Bay is in a process of evolution, and the next few years will show which of two courses it will take. The town became popular purely on its merits as a seaside health resort, and consequently the outstanding industry of the past has been the keeping of boarding houses. Gradually, however, the mild equable winter

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<sup>9</sup> Keith Gildart, *North Wales Miners: A fragile unity, 1945-1996*, Cardiff 2001, p.8.

<sup>10</sup> Ken Davies, 'The growth and Development of settlement and population in Flintshire', University of Wales, Swansea, unpublished MSc. thesis, 1970, p.249.

<sup>11</sup> 1911 Census Report.



climate has attracted winter residents, with the result that to-day the town is tending to become more and more a residential town.'<sup>12</sup>

During this period the population of Colwyn Bay, Prestatyn and Rhyl increased by over 50 per cent. These were resort towns, and proved to be popular holiday destinations not only for native North Waliens, but also for those who lived in the North West and the Midlands. In essence their growth reflected the increasing prosperity of the middle classes, who had both the time and money to go on holiday. Moreover a report prepared by Flintshire County Council's sub-committee on the tourist industry attributed the continued appeal of these resorts to the advent of the 1938 'Holidays with Pay Act'.<sup>13</sup> These rapid developments affected the dynamics of the coastal towns. Not only did they accelerate cultural change, but also in economic terms they opened up a range of opportunities. The service sector boomed with hotels, guesthouses and entertainment venues reaping the greatest rewards. In addition, such developments also opened up more diverse employment opportunities for the area's residents, especially for women.

Nonetheless the negative aspects of this change were just as significant. During economic slumps the resorts were the first to suffer, as potential visitors were put off due to financial constraints.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore work associated with the tourist industry tended to be of a seasonal nature. Thus unemployment was higher during the winter months. However these were not only holiday resorts. Some visitors extended their stay indefinitely. By the turn of the twentieth century the coastal towns had become popular retirement locations. In her case study of Rhyl, Gwenfair Parry has shown that as early as 1891 a significant minority of the town's inhabitants emanated from Lancashire, Staffordshire, Cheshire and

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<sup>12</sup> William McKendrick, 'Colwyn Bay UDC, Medical Officer of Health Report', 1926, UDD/A/6/I, DRO, p.7.

<sup>13</sup> Flintshire County Council, 'Report of the Tourist Industry Sub-committee', 1946, FC/C/3/6, FRO.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Warwickshire. At this time less than half of the town's population was actually born in Flintshire<sup>15</sup>.

The contrast between Flintshire and Montgomeryshire's infrastructures, in particular, was stark. Whilst Flintshire enjoyed a large degree of success during the 1920s, Montgomeryshire's economy continued to experience a punishing decline. The county's dependency on agriculture (as shown in Table 1.7) was insufficient to retain her native population. In the rural districts of Forden, Llanfyllin, Machynlleth and Newtown and Llanidloes this sector accounted for more than 60 per cent of male employment during the 1920s and 1930s:

Table 1.7

*Montgomeryshire: Percentage of the most popular male \*occupations, 1911-1931*

| District                    | 1911**      |             |                         | 1921        |             |                         | 1931        |            |                         |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------|------------|-------------------------|
|                             | Agriculture | Industry    | Distributive / Commerce | Agriculture | Industry    | Distributive / Commerce | Agriculture | Industry   | Distributive / Commerce |
| Llanfyllin MB               | -           | -           | -                       | 35.0        | 15.3        | 11.0                    | 35.3        | 6.2        | 13.5                    |
| Llanidloes MB               | -           | -           | -                       | 4.2         | 31.7        | 17.0                    | 4.4         | 26.6       | 20.8                    |
| Machynlleth UD              | -           | -           | -                       | 6.6         | 39.2        | 19.4                    | 6.8         | 37.0       | 19.7                    |
| Montgomery MB               | -           | -           | -                       | 33.0        | 15.4        | 15.1                    | 27.5        | 11.6       | 15.2                    |
| Newtown & Llanllwchaïarn UD | 13.0        | 26.1        | 4.1                     | 12.4        | 19.9        | 20.5                    | 14.9        | 14.2       | 26.6                    |
| Welshpool MB                | 25.8        | 28.0        | 0                       | 28.0        | 21.0        | 13.5                    | 25.9        | 14.6       | 17.4                    |
| Forden RD                   | -           | -           | -                       | 61.3        | 10.8        | 3.5                     | 62.4        | 7.4        | 5.8                     |
| Llanfyllin RD               | -           | -           | -                       | 63.8        | 10.5        | 4.5                     | 63.0        | 7.9        | 5.0                     |
| Machynlleth RD              | -           | -           | -                       | 61.3        | 16.4        | 3.6                     | 68.4        | 10.2       | 4.3                     |
| Newtown & Llanidloes RD     | -           | -           | -                       | 70.0        | 10.9        | 2.9                     | 70.1        | 5.3        | 3.8                     |
| Other Urban Districts       | 15.6        | 12.3        | 1.1                     | -           | -           | -                       | -           | -          | -                       |
| Other Rural Districts       | 65.5        | 6.8         | 0.2                     | -           | -           | -                       | -           | -          | -                       |
| <b>Total</b>                | <b>49.3</b> | <b>10.5</b> | <b>0.8</b>              | <b>48.0</b> | <b>13.8</b> | <b>8.1</b>              | <b>50.5</b> | <b>9.9</b> | <b>9.7</b>              |

Source: Census reports, 1911-1931

\* Most popular industries: Mining & quarrying; Engineering, shipbuilding & electrical goods; Textiles; Clothing; Transport & communication.

Since the late nineteenth century Montgomeryshire's economy had been badly affected by industrial change. Formerly towns like Llanidloes and Newtown had been important centres of woollen production. However following the increased mechanisation of the sector and competition from the mills of Lancashire and Yorkshire, the industry began to contract. As a consequence throughout the first half of the twentieth century farming

<sup>15</sup> G. Parry & M. A. Williams, The Welsh language and the 1891 Census, Cardiff 1999.

provided the county's economic staple. However, this was not a prosperous county. As in many other agricultural areas, depopulation was a major problem. Indeed Montgomeryshire's population peaked in 1841 and had been in decline thereafter.<sup>16</sup> Moreover as table 1.4 shows, those districts most dependent on farming (Newtown & Llanidloes and Machynlleth Rural) experienced the greatest population decline between 1911 and 1931. Yet nothing was done to reverse this trend, a fact that angered the Montgomeryshire Joint Planning Committee on postwar reconstruction in the late 1940s.<sup>17</sup> However, without a large degree of investment, areas like Montgomeryshire could not compete with the draw of urban life. John Saville highlights the fact that improved employment prospects, higher wage levels, superior cultural and social amenities, and a better standard of life in general, meant that a future in farming was no longer attractive to young people.<sup>18</sup> Montgomeryshire's stagnant position and ageing population made it a sharp contrast to Flintshire.

### *The impact of the depression*

Whilst rural areas had been suffering for some decades, by the early 1930s most industries in the region were beginning to feel the effects of the recession. Whilst North East Wales had enjoyed comparative prosperity in some parts, the impact of the global depression proved to be intense. Indeed, writing on behalf of the North Wales Industrial Development Committee Huw T. Edwards, a leading trade unionist and councillor, argued:

‘It is, I feel, necessary to draw your attention to the fact that to all intents and purposes North Wales was a ‘special area’ from 1931 to 1938 – without enjoying the privileges of the more ‘vocal’ ‘special areas’, such as South Wales and Durham.

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<sup>16</sup> Montgomeryshire County Council, ‘Post-War Review of Montgomeryshire’, n. d. (c.1948), MC CPL R1, PoRO.

<sup>17</sup> Montgomeryshire Joint Planning Committee, ‘A Report on post-war planning’, n.d. (c.1947), MC CPL R1, PoRO.

The total sum of ‘human misery’ can be best expressed by the statement that out of every 100 citizens of the six North Wales counties who wanted to work throughout the eight years – 1931/8, only seventy, or so were allowed, and many of these fortunate enough to find work only did so intermittently.’<sup>19</sup>

The economic situation had deteriorated to such an extent that certain parts of North Wales could indeed have been designated a ‘special area’. Edwards was angered that the introduction of the Special Areas Act – designed to combat structural unemployment in Britain’s most deprived areas had not considered the needs of North Wales. Two commissioners had been appointed to serve Central Scotland, North East England, West Cumberland and South Wales.<sup>20</sup> These areas benefited from greater financial resources and from schemes which aimed to assist men to return to work. Yet Huw T. Edwards asserted that some areas of North Wales also suffered similar, severe, structural problems, largely because of over reliance on extractive industries. This argument is justified. In 1931 Flintshire’s unemployment rate of 33.8 per cent was identical to that of Monmouth, and only 3 per cent less than Glamorgan’s. It was also the highest in North East Wales, and far exceeded the national British average of 22 per cent. Moreover up until the mid 1930s Denbighshire’s unemployment figures remained around 30 per cent, again far higher than the British norm.

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<sup>18</sup> John Saville, Rural depopulation in England and Wales, 1851-1951, London, 1957.

<sup>19</sup> H. T. Edwards, Typed memorandum on behalf of the North Wales Industrial Development Committee, H. T. Edwards MS, C5, NLW. n.d.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Thorpe, Britain in the 1930s, Oxford 1992, pp.75-78.

Table 1.8

Unemployment in North East and South Wales, 1931-1938

| County                  | Percentage of insured workers unemployed: Monthly average |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|-------------------------|---|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                         | 1931  | 1932 | 1933 | 1934 | 1935 | 1936 | 1937 | 1938 |
| <i>Great Britain</i>    | 22.0  | 22.2 | 20.3 | 17.3 | 16.2 | 13.9 | 10.8 | 12.7 |
| <i>England</i>          | 20.7  | 20.6 | 18.6 | 15.4 | 14.3 | 12.0 | 9.6  | 11.8 |
| <i>Wales</i>            | 33.5  | 37.5 | 35.4 | 33.5 | 33.1 | 31.4 | 22.3 | 24.8 |
| <i>Scotland</i>         | 25.4  | 28.0 | 27.2 | 24.6 | 23.2 | 20.5 | 16.0 | 16.4 |
| <i>North East Wales</i> |   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Denbigh                 | 21.8  | 28.0 | 28.9 | 26.5 | 28.2 | 23.9 | 19.0 | 19.6 |
| Flint                   | 33.8  | 28.7 | 25.7 | 19.8 | 19.2 | 15.8 | 14.5 | 24.1 |
| Montgomeryshire         | 21.6  | 24.2 | 30.8 | 27.5 | 29.5 | 25.1 | 23.8 | 21.9 |
| <i>South Wales</i>      |   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Carmarthen              | 27.9  | 27.5 | 21.5 | 21.2 | 24.4 | 22.8 | 21.3 | 27.7 |
| Monmouth                | 33.8  | 42.0 | 40.6 | 36.0 | 33.5 | 32.7 | 21.1 | 23.6 |
| Glamorgan               | 36.7  | 40.4 | 37.9 | 36.9 | 36.4 | 34.9 | 23.7 | 26.4 |

Source: M. P. Fogarty, *Prospects of the Industrial Areas of Great Britain*, London, 1945., pp.18-19.

The recession of the 1930s hit all aspects of Welsh economic life. Deprivation and hardship were experienced on a large scale. Table 1.8 shows that all three counties exceeded the national unemployment average throughout this period. The statistics illustrate the differing nature of the economic problem facing the three counties. Flintshire's difficulties may be attributed to the cyclical nature of the local economy. One of the main reasons for this was the crisis facing the county's largest employer, John Summers, which employed over six thousand workers. In April 1931, on 'Black Friday', the directors were forced to make four thousand men redundant, retaining the services of only a third of their original workforce.<sup>21</sup> The unemployment statistics for the county's major towns in September 1931 reflect the crippling affect these cut-backs had on the local economy.

<sup>21</sup> B. Redhead & S. Goodie, *The Summers of Shotton*, London 1987, p.105.

The unemployment figures for Shotton in particular highlight the impact of mass redundancy. The directors of John Summers based their decision on the fact that the British economy was being flooded by cheap steel imports from abroad, and thus they were unable to compete at the same level. Moreover their export market was also in decline due to the introduction of high tariffs in some foreign countries. Between 1931 and 1932 the company only produced 25 per cent of their previous year's output.<sup>22</sup> The introduction of safeguarding measures was instrumental to their later revival. Flintshire was one county that truly experienced the benefits of the National Government's economic policy. Table 1.8 shows a gradual and consistent decline in unemployment rates between 1931 and 1937. Other areas of Flintshire suffered from longer term problems. Six of the county's eight towns named in table 1.9 had over one thousand unemployed men.

Table 1.9

Flintshire: Unemployment statistics for September 1931

| Town                 | Wholly Unemployed |        | Temporary Stoppages |        | Total |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------|---------------------|--------|-------|
|                      | Male              | Female | Male                | Female |       |
| <i>Flint</i>         | 657               | 39     | 291                 | 113    | 1100  |
| <i>Abergele</i>      | 201               | 5      | 0                   | 0      | 206   |
| <i>Buckley</i>       | 669               | 29     | 402                 | 16     | 1116  |
| <i>Holywell</i>      | 846               | 86     | 128                 | 48     | 1108  |
| <i>Mold</i>          | 855               | 41     | 273                 | 31     | 1200  |
| <i>Rhyl</i>          | 8                 | 0      | 8                   | 0      | 16    |
| <i>Shotton</i>       | 1392              | 60     | 908                 | 85     | 2445  |
| <b>Overall total</b> | 4628              | 260    | 2010                | 293    | 7191  |

Source. *County Herald*, 2 October 1931

These statistics cannot all be attributed to the impact of cutbacks in the local steel industry. The Flint and Holywell figures reflect the impact of the recession on Courtaulds. Nonetheless this was only a short-term problem. A memorandum prepared by Flintshire County Council in the aftermath of the Second World War outlined areas more seriously affected. Deeside, Mold and Buckley were judged to be in greatest need of regeneration. Many industries in these localities had closed and there were few new employment

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p.118.

opportunities. The decline of coalmining around the towns of Flint and Buckley, and the closure of the tinsplate mines in Mold, were a particular problem.<sup>23</sup> The report also drew attention to the situation facing the coastal towns of Prestatyn and Rhyl. Seasonal unemployment was a major problem here. The Council recommended that greater effort should be made to attract light industries to the area, in an attempt to resolve these generic problems.<sup>24</sup> Recalling his experiences as a Relieving Officer in Mold during the late 1930s, R. Wesley Hughes provides an insight into the hardships endured due to the economic climate:

‘When I first came to Mold in 1938 the incidence of poverty was so great that in one street every other house was visited. We were so hard pressed by the load cases that there was no time at all to carry out any real social work; all that a Relieving Officer could do was to meet the incidence of need and destitution.’<sup>25</sup>

The structural problems Denbighshire encountered were far more grave. The county’s coastal towns experienced similar problems to Rhyl and Prestatyn, whilst the decline of the extractive industries and agriculture meant that more serious issues had to be faced. The incidence of unemployment in former mining villages reached all-time highs during the 1930s. Indeed the *Wrexham Leader* reported that the unemployment levels in Rhosllannerchrugog were the second highest of any community in Britain in February 1936.<sup>26</sup> Equally depressed was Montgomeryshire, whose unemployment statistics between 1931 and 1938 virtually mirrored Denbighshire’s. Whilst the Wrexham area’s problems visibly mounted in the aftermath of the pit closures, Montgomeryshire’s industrial situation had been steadily worsening since the turn of the century. By early 1931 the impact of the

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<sup>23</sup> Flintshire County Council, ‘Memorandum on Industrial development’, n.d. (c.1946), FC/13/4, FRO.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> R. Wesley Hughes, ‘The effects of the depression in Flintshire during the 1920s and 1930s’, *Clwyd Historian*, 32, Spring 1994, p.5.

Wall Street Crash had affected the county's economy. Table 1.10 highlights the fact that within the space of a few months unemployment had increased significantly in Newtown, and more than doubled in Welshpool, Llanidloes and Machynlleth:

Table 1.10

Montgomeryshire: Unemployment statistics, November 1921- January 1931

| Date        | Newtown |        | Welshpool |        | Llanidloes |        | Machynlleth |        | Total |
|-------------|---------|--------|-----------|--------|------------|--------|-------------|--------|-------|
|             | Male    | Female | Male      | Female | Male       | Female | Male        | Female |       |
| 1921 (Nov)  | 226     | 44     | 144       | 26     | 106        | 13     | 122         | 3      | 684   |
| 1922 (Nov)  | 101     | 16     | -         | -      | 86         | 7      | 59          | 1      | 270*  |
| 1926 (Sept) | 155     | 50     | 51        | 6      | 109        | 48     | 73          | 5      | 497   |
| 1928 (Mar)  | 256     | 43     | 153       | 4      | 139        | 36     | 157         | 5      | 793   |
| 1928 (Oct)  | 201     | 69     | 63        | 5      | 129        | 43     | 88          | 7      | 598   |
| 1929 (Jan)  | 245     | 60     | 154       | 3      | 200        | 47     | 153         | 4      | 866   |
| 1929 (Apr)  | 145     | 23     | 91        | 2      | 89         | 25     | 103         | 2      | 480   |
| 1929 (Sept) | 133     | 52     | 54        | 5      | 89         | 34     | 78          | 2      | 447   |
| 1929 (Dec)  | 173     | 32     | 118       | 7      | 146        | 51     | 102         | 4      | 633   |
| 1930 (June) | 105     | 51     | 112       | 2      | 143        | 80     | 93          | 2      | 588   |
| 1930 (Oct)  | 185     | 86     | 128       | 6      | 102        | 50     | 78          | 4      | 639   |
| 1931 (Jan)  | 283     | 91     | 228       | 14     | 219        | 89     | 245         | 8      | 1177  |

\*No statistics were given for Welshpool in November 1922.

Source: Ministry of Labour (Statistics from Newtown Labour Exchange). MC/CUN/F3, PoRO.

Montgomeryshire and Denbighshire would have benefited from state assistance to strengthen their economic profiles. However only following the outbreak of the Second World War, and the increased demands on productivity, were their economies eventually salvaged. Whilst Flintshire was also the beneficiary of the war industries, 'safeguarding' ensured its stability. Thus, quality of life and job prospects was very much dependant on where one resided during the inter-war period.

### The social impact of change

Social and cultural changes naturally accompanied the economic and demographic evolution of North East Wales. Such developments had far-reaching implications. They affected the character of each constituency, and had an impact upon the way in which their inhabitants lived their lives. For example the increase of workers from English counties to

<sup>26</sup> Wrexham Leader, 3 July 1936.



Flintshire, and the departure of Montgomeryshire's younger generation, altered the dynamics of these societies. Those bodies who wished to represent the community's interests, such as local government and political parties, were forced to respond to these challenges. Some were more successful than others. Many communities in this region underwent significant physical change, as the area's housing record indicates. Housing is worth special consideration as it affects the quality of life enjoyed by residents. It was also an important political issue in Wales.

Health and housing were also closely related. Indeed the report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Anti-Tuberculosis Service in Wales and Monmouthshire, written by its chairman Clement Davies and published in 1939, outlined the nature of this relationship:

‘Disease flourishes where families are herded together in dark, damp and dingy houses, where they be built singly or crowded in courts and narrow alleys, destitute of light and air, often ramshackle and rotting, with small windows which will not open, and leaky and sagging roofs. These are the haunts of the germs, which are a danger and a menace to man.’<sup>27</sup>

The Inquiry had been established to ascertain why tuberculosis mortality rates were higher in Wales than in England. Insanitary housing was considered to be a major contributory factor, as local authorities were either unable or had failed to ensure adequate provision:

‘It is obvious...that the Local Authorities in Wales have not taken the advantage

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<sup>27</sup> Ministry of Health, Report of the Committee Inquiry into the Anti-Tuberculosis Service in Wales and Monmouthshire, HMSO, 1939, p.124.

that they should have done of the powers and assistance given to them by Parliament. The figures show that the number of new houses erected in Wales since 1919 compares unfavourably with the number for England and Wales as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

The report highlighted the fact that housebuilding in the United Kingdom had come to a virtual standstill between 1914 and 1919. The Great War brought this problem into sharp focus, particularly around the munitions factories in cities like Glasgow, Birmingham and London. Moreover in areas whose population was expanding, demand initially outstripped supply. In the first instance this was the case in Flintshire. Between 1918 and 1922 the local press campaigned relentlessly to raise awareness of this problem. In February 1919 the *County Herald* reported great demand for good housing around the areas of Mold, Holywell and Flint.<sup>29</sup> Moreover by 1920 the paper claimed that the county was facing a 'housing famine' due the shortage of suitable dwellings.<sup>30</sup> This was also a problem that pervaded the expanding areas of Denbighshire. In 1920 the county medical officer recorded his alarm over the serious nature of the problem of overcrowding in Denbighshire, referring specifically to the condition of housing in the rural district of Wrexham:

'There is a shortage of houses in the district. In addition to this shortage of houses we actually need far and above the present number, there is the actual want of new houses to replace those unfit, by reason of age and general defects, for habitation.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.138.

<sup>29</sup> *County Herald*, 14 February 1919.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 9 January 1920.

<sup>31</sup> County Medical Officer, *Annual Report*, 1920, CD/H/1/2, DRO, p.25.

Gradually the needs of the working classes were addressed. Not only did local councils take advantage of the funding that was available to them to build new homes, in addition the region's largest employers erected new houses to accommodate members of their workforce. In Flintshire, from 1910 to the latter 1920s, John Summers began to build a large number of new homes adjacent to their Shotton factory in the Garden City area of Deeside. The Courtaulds textile firm in the Flint area instigated a similar initiative. Whilst they were unable to compete with the investment of John Summers, the cottages and hospital they erected were designed to help attract key workers to their factories.<sup>32</sup> In Denbighshire the opening of the Llay Main colliery in 1923 also ensured the greater provision of housing. Its owners, Carlton Collieries Association, developed Llay along the lines of other 'archetypal' colliery villages.<sup>33</sup>

Significantly the housing situation had been largely resolved by the mid 1930s, at least in the region's most densely populated and industrial areas. The statistics collated by the Anti-tuberculosis commission illustrates the fact that within a Welsh context both Flintshire and Denbighshire had exemplary records. Flintshire's overall housing provision was the best in the Principality closely followed by Denbighshire in second place. Table 1.11 illustrates their success. Whilst private enterprise made a substantial contribution, the key feature was the large number of houses built by Local Authorities.

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<sup>32</sup> Ken Davies, *op. cit.*, p.236

Table 1.11

*Housebuilding in Wales, 1918-1939*

| <i>County or County Borough</i> | <i>Houses built by Local Authorities or Private Enterprise</i> | <i>Houses built by Local Authorities per 100,000 inhabitants</i> | <i>Position</i> |
|---------------------------------|--|--|-----------------|
| Flint                           | 14186  | 12800  | 1               |
| Denbigh                         | 11920  | 7570   | 2               |
| Swansea                         | 12215  | 7460   | 3               |
| Cardiff                         | 14346  | 6450   | 4               |
| Newport                         | 5982   | 6430   | 5               |
| Caernarvon                      | 7155   | 6000   | 6               |
| Camarthen                       | 8085   | 4500   | 7               |
| Anglesey                        | 1919   | 3900   | 8               |
| Monmouth                        | 13953  | 3890   | 9               |
| Glamorgan                       | 30966  | 3870   | 10              |
| Pembroke                        | 2918   | 3330   | 11              |
| Cardigan                        | 1723   | 3120   | 12              |
| Brecknock                       | 1502   | 2580   | 13              |
| Radnor                          | 415  | 1980   | 14              |
| Montgomeryshire                 | 942  | 1960   | 15              |
| Merioneth                       | 781  | 1850   | 16              |
| Merthyr Tydfil                  | 794  | 1090   | 17              |

Source. Anti-Tuberculosis Service Report, HMSO, 1939

The Commissioner's highest praise was reserved for Flintshire. The county's exceptional housing record supported their claims that health and housing were connected, as for the previous seven years Flintshire had boasted the lowest tuberculosis rate in Wales:

'The impression left upon us was that if there are, and there may be here and there in the county, defects to individual homes or with regard to water supply or sanitation, the county is so compact and so well administered that those defects are soon discovered, and when discovered they are corrected with as little lapse of time as is reasonably possible. We cannot pay too high a tribute to this county, its Council, and its most efficient officials'<sup>34</sup>

In comparative terms, Flintshire was one of the most affluent Welsh counties. Its sustained economic growth up until the 1930s had ensured its prosperity. This was also partly true

<sup>33</sup> Keith Gildart, 'The social and political development of North Wales miners, 1945-1996', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of York, p.68.

<sup>34</sup> Anti-Tuberculosis Service Report, opt. cit, p.167.

for Denbighshire. However an interesting dichotomy existed in this county. Whilst its industrial and coastal areas expanded, its rural districts did not. Thus, predominantly agricultural communities did not enjoy the same housing provision as the urban areas. The difficulties that faced the county's administrators was recognised by the Anti-Tuberculosis Commission. Given the circumstances, the Report conceded that Flintshire was 'extraordinarily well administrated'. Overall they were pleased with efforts to improve housing provision:

'We have little comment to make upon the conditions in this county, as we are satisfied that, whatever may have been the position in the past, the County Council and the District Councils are now very active and desirous of improving health conditions within their areas, but we realise that the financial difficulties of the smaller boroughs and of the more scattered rural districts will hamper them in the carrying out of their duties.'<sup>35</sup>

Significantly Montgomeryshire trailed behind Flintshire and Denbighshire. Its housing record was very poor. The Commission's inspectors observed that some of the dwellings visited in their survey was amongst the worst they had come across.<sup>36</sup> It was noted:

'It is fair to say that, in every one of these small towns there are houses, which can only be called hovels, which should have been pulled down long ago.'<sup>37</sup>

In the opinion of the inspectors there was 'no justification' for the Council's poor record on public housing. Since 1918 only 282 houses had been erected with the assistance of the state, and just 110 were in the process of being built in 1938. Indeed it was revealed that

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pp.164-5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.176.

Montgomeryshire County Council had only recently initiated a policy to deal with those dwellings categorised as ‘extremely bad’.<sup>38</sup> These findings would have come as no surprise to the county’s residents. Throughout the inter-war period the local press highlighted this problem. As early as 1919 the *Montgomeryshire Express* had been highly critical of the attitude of council officials. Despite their acknowledgement of the problem, the paper asserted they ‘are wrestling now with a scandalous unwillingness to exploit the state-aided housing reform scheme’.<sup>39</sup> County councils possessed a large degree of discretion to initiate house-building programmes. The onus lay with them to attract government subsidies. Thus the *Express* was frustrated with the mentality of local council officials, accusing them of doing little to improve the living conditions of those in greatest need. The paper argued that the ‘traditional dislike of progress’ which pervaded local council committees (which were predominantly composed of farmers) was stunting Montgomeryshire’s development.<sup>40</sup>

Not all of this criticism was justified. The county council experienced difficulty in attracting government money for this purpose. In 1921 it was reported that the Ministry of Health had refused their application to build more houses in Newtown. The official reason for this decision was that priority was being given to growing industrial centres, thus Montgomeryshire did not qualify.<sup>41</sup> Yet if Montgomeryshire’s most industrial town was unable to attract government investment, the remainder of the county stood little chance. Despite renewed attempts at persuasion, the council’s success was limited. Indeed the housing situation had reached such a low point by 1923 that the wealthy local MP, David Davies, offered to provide the bricks for a proposed property development in Welshpool if the council agreed to fund the labour and building costs. This was in response to the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.176.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p176.

<sup>39</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 4 February 1919.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 4 February 1919.

revelation that 37 of the town’s dwellings were not regarded fit for human habitation, and a further 62 failed to be categorised as ‘reasonably fit’ by the county’s housing inspector.<sup>42</sup> Montgomery County Council was faced with a difficult predicament. They were judged by the local press for lacking a proactive and progressive spirit, but when they sought assistance the government failed to comprehend the dire state of housing in rural Wales.

Table 1.12 illustrates the link between inadequate and insanitary housing, and the incidence of tuberculosis mortality between 1930 and 1937:

Table 1.12

*Welsh Tuberculosis death rates per million, 1930-1936*

| County          | Total deaths from TB<br>1930-1936 | Average annual death<br>rate from TB per million,<br>1930-1936 | Position |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|--|----------|
| Flint           | 554                               | 694  | 1        |
| Radnor          | 108                               | 742  | 2        |
| Montgomeryshire | 255                               | 769  | 3        |
| Denbigh         | 859                               | 782  | 4        |
| Monmouth        | 1,946                             | 819  | 5        |
| Brecknock       | 353                               | 891  | 6        |
| Camarthen       | 1,146                             | 918  | 7        |
| Glamorgan       | 4,980                             | 938  | 8        |
| Swansea         | 1,098                             | 951  | 9        |
| Pembroke        | 573                               | 956  | 10       |
| Merthyr Tydfil  | 539                               | 1,102  | 11       |
| Cardigan        | 420                               | 1,104  | 12       |
| Newport         | 710                               | 1,112  | 13       |
| Anglesey        | 390                               | 1,153  | 14       |
| Merioneth       | 351                               | 1,196  | 15       |
| Cardiff         | 1,869                             | 1,201  | 16       |
| Caernarvon      | 1,073                             | 1,283  | 17       |

Source: Anti-Tuberculosis Report, HMSO 1939.

In a sense table 1.12 fails to adequately convey the true extent of the problem identified by the Anti-Tuberculosis Commission. The severity of the housing crisis in some pockets of rural Wales, particularly in Montgomeryshire, Merioneth and Carnarvonshire, was diluted by the higher standards of other districts within their jurisdiction. Nonetheless Flintshire remained the shining example for all other Welsh counties. It showed how the efficient

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 19 July 1921.

management of resources and effective planning could improve living standards. Even though its population was consistently growing, in-comers to the area were accommodated. The fact that it was a growing county meant that qualifying for governmental money was less of a problem. However another factor should also be considered. More than any other county in North East Wales, this was a politically active and competitive council. Social problems were actively addressed because they were deemed politically important.

The county council elections of 1919 in Flintshire highlighted the competition between all three political parties. This competition continued throughout the period. Table 1.13 illustrates this point:

Table 1.13

Political composition of Flintshire County Council, 1907-1946

| Year | Party          |                     |               |                    | Number of seats |
|------|----------------|---------------------|---------------|--------------------|-----------------|
|      | <i>Liberal</i> | <i>Conservative</i> | <i>Labour</i> | <i>Independent</i> |                 |
| 1907 | 20             | 20                  | -             | 2                  | 42              |
| 1910 | 18             | 24                  | -             | -                  | 42              |
| 1913 | 21             | 19                  | -             | 2                  | 42              |
| 1919 | 15             | 13                  | 12            | 2                  | 42              |
| 1922 | 23             | 16                  | 8             | -                  | 47              |
| 1925 | 28             | 13                  | 6             | 1                  | 48              |
| 1928 | 26             | 14                  | 7             | 2                  | 48              |
| 1931 | 24             | 11                  | 11            | 3                  | 49              |
| 1934 | 24             | 10                  | 11            | 4                  | 49              |
| 1937 | 29             | 15                  | 11            | 5                  | 60              |
| 1946 | 25             | 14                  | 14            | 7                  | 60              |

Source. Various editions of the *County Herald*, 1907-1946.

Labour's breakthrough in Flintshire in 1919 was important, particularly when it is considered that this level of representation was not reflected in the industrial districts of East Denbighshire. Yet whilst the party had gained much ground in 1919, this was to be the high point of its success during the inter-war period. The Liberals quickly regained their popularity, and made a lasting impression on the council's administration. Their leadership became synonymous with progressive efficiency and a strong management

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid, 25 September 1923.



style. The Liberal party also controlled the Denbighshire and Montgomeryshire county councils for much of this period. However in these cases they did not vote as a party or form a political administration. Local newspapers often failed to inform readers of their representative's political affiliation. Indeed it was argued by the *Wrexham Leader* that political labels based on national allegiances ought to be removed from local contests.<sup>43</sup>

There is no direct evidence to suggest that political control ensured the greater efficiency of Flintshire County Council. In comparative terms Flintshire was wealthier than neighbouring Denbighshire and Montgomeryshire, and this was no doubt significant. Nonetheless the 'feel good factor' of some inhabitants should not be underestimated. More than any other county in the region Flintshire made the most of the opportunities to improve the conditions of a growing population.

### Cultural change

Whilst demographic change influences a region's physical composition it also has an impact on its cultural character. In Wales this is most often discussed in relation to the survival or decline of the Welsh language, which it is argued was a major influence on the continuing strength of the Liberal party.<sup>44</sup> Language is not simply a means of communication, but rather lies at the heart of a culture and way of life. The growth of a non-Welsh speaking population threatened the language. Incomers brought with them their own cultural expectations and needs, which was particularly evident in the coastal resorts. The growth of the cinema and increased leisure time accelerated change. All this put pressure on community leaders. They had to deal with the requirements of a new population, whilst at the same time satisfying indigenous residents. This was not an easy task. Tables 1.14 and 1.15 show that although the decline of the Welsh language was very

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<sup>43</sup> Wrexham Leader, 14 January 1927.

apparent a considerable proportion of the region's population were able to speak Welsh throughout this period. Even in the areas of greatest change in Rhyl, Prestatyn and Colwyn Bay, a strong Welsh community continued to thrive. Council leaders – and political parties – could not ignore either English or Welsh-speaking communities.

Table 1.14

\*Percentage of Welsh Speakers in North East Wales, 1901-1931

| <b>County</b>                 | <b>District/ Borough</b>    | <b>1901</b> | <b>1911</b> | <b>1921</b> | <b>1931</b> |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b><i>Denbighshire</i></b>    | Abergele & Pensarn UD       | 81.5        | 77.3        | 56.8        | 65.2        |
|                               | Colwyn Bay UD               | 48.4        | 40.7        | 26.2        | 37.3        |
|                               | Denbigh MB                  | 86.0        | 83.3        | 80.8        | 81.6        |
|                               | Llangollen UD               | 70.7        | 68.3        | 52.9        | 54.2        |
|                               | Llanrwst UD                 | 92.2        | 89.0        | 88.7        | 85.6        |
|                               | Ruthin MB                   | 84.5        | 79.2        | 68.5        | 68.3        |
|                               | Wrexham MB                  | 17.2        | 16.1        | 15.8        | 14.9        |
|                               | Chirk RD                    | 48.2        | 44.8        | 41.3        | 39.1        |
|                               | *Glan Conwy                 | 92.5        | 82.2        | 86.2        | 79.3        |
|                               | Llangollen RD               | 80.8        | 76.2        | 69.7        | 66.4        |
|                               | Llanrwst RD                 | 94.8        | 92.9        | 90.1        | 90.1        |
|                               | Llansilin RD                | 92.5        | 90.6        | 86.1        | 86.3        |
|                               | Ruthin RD                   | 91.6        | 87.8        | 79.7        | 81.3        |
|                               | St. Asaph RD                | 89.4        | 87.6        | 81.4        | 74.5        |
|                               | Uwchaled RD                 | 97.9        | 93.2        | 93.6        | 94.9        |
|                               | Wrexham RD                  | 53.9        | 50.5        | 43.1        | 40.6        |
| <b><i>Flintshire</i></b>      | Buckley UD                  | 10.6        | 8.9         | 5.8         | 4.9         |
|                               | Flint MB                    | 48.0        | 35.2        | 25.5        | 22.9        |
|                               | Connah's Quay UD            | 13.0        | 12.0        | 9.4         | 8.5         |
|                               | Holywell UD                 | 70.0        | 60.0        | 42.7        | 48.6        |
|                               | Mold UD                     | 59.2        | 52.3        | 42.4        | 36.0        |
|                               | Prestatyn UD                | 62.0        | 46.9        | 25.9        | 30.0        |
|                               | Rhyl UD                     | 49.3        | 40.5        | 25.2        | 28.5        |
|                               | Hawarden RD                 | 22.7        | 19.4        | 15.9        | 14.3        |
|                               | Holywell RD                 | 78.1        | 72.8        | 62.3        | 60.8        |
|                               | Overton RD                  | 2.8         | 2.7         | 2.2         | 2.5         |
|                               | St. Asaph                   | 78.3        | 69.7        | 55.3        | 55.3        |
| <b><i>Montgomeryshire</i></b> | Llanfyllin MB               | 78.3        | 73.6        | 70.1        | 66.1        |
|                               | Llanidloes MB               | 51.5        | 42.9        | 34.6        | 33.4        |
|                               | Machynlleth UD              | 88.6        | 85.9        | 85.0        | 80.4        |
|                               | Montgomery MB               | 6.4         | 6.1         | 5.8         | 8.2         |
|                               | Newtown & Llanllwchaiarn UD | 13.0        | 10.5        | 10.7        | 11.3        |
|                               | Welshpool MB                | 11.4        | 9.7         | 9.4         | 9.3         |
|                               | Forde RD                    | 10.0        | 9.5         | 9.2         | 8.7         |
|                               | Llanfyllin RD               | 70.4        | 67.5        | 64.1        | 61.7        |
|                               | Machynlleth RD              | 97.2        | 96.5        | 94.3        | 94.5        |
| Newtown & Llanidloes RD       | 51.4                        | 47.9        | 44.2        | 40.2        |             |

\*Population aged 3 and above. Source: Census Reports, 1901-1931.

The language was at its strongest in the rural communities of North East Wales where agriculture dominated. Table 1.14 shows that in the municipal borough of Denbigh and the districts of Llanrwst, Machynlleth, Llansilin, Uwchaled, along with rural areas of Ruthin and St. Asaph, in excess of 80 per cent of the population consistently spoke Welsh between 1901 and 1931. Significantly many of these communities also experienced the effects of depopulation. Conversely in Abergele and Glan Conwy the Welsh speaking population had exceeded 80 per cent in 1901, but rapidly declined thereafter. Yet in spite of demographic growth Welsh culture remained strong. Even in 1931 the percentage who spoke the language exceeded 65 per cent. Population changes along with proximity to the English border were important indicators of the language's weakest areas. The districts that had undergone great demographic growth also saw the most significant linguistic decline. During this period the coastal towns, along with the growing industrial centres of Flint and Holywell, witnessed a fall of over 20 per cent in the number of people who spoke Welsh. Table 1.15 illustrates the rate and level of relative change in the region. Yet even here a significant minority continued to speak Welsh. In Rhyl, Prestatyn and Colwyn Bay – areas of population growth - around a third of the population still spoke Welsh, whilst this was true for more than half of Holywell's (rural and urban) residents. Thus two distinct linguistic cultures coexisted.

Table 1.15

**Spoken Welsh: Percentage of relative change in North East Wales, 1901-1931**  
(Population 3 years and above)

| County                      | District/ Borough      | 1901-11       | 1911-21 | 1921-31 | 1901-31 |       |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|---------------|---------|---------|---------|-------|
| <b>Denbighshire</b>         | Abergele & Pensarn UD  | -4.1          | -20.5   | 8.4     | -16.2   |       |
|                             | Colwyn Bay UD          | -7.7          | -14.5   | 11.0    | -11.1   |       |
|                             | Denbigh MB             | -2.7          | -2.5    | 0.8     | -4.4    |       |
|                             | Llangollen UD          | -2.5          | -15.3   | 1.3     | -16.5   |       |
|                             | Llanrwst UD            | -3.3          | -0.3    | -3.1    | -6.7    |       |
|                             | Ruthin MB              | -5.3          | -10.7   | -0.2    | -16.2   |       |
|                             | Wrexham MB             | -1.1          | -0.3    | -1.0    | 5.5     |       |
|                             | Chirk RD               | -3.3          | -3.5    | -2.2    | -9.1    |       |
|                             | *Glan Conwy            | -10.3         | 4.0     | -6.9    | -13.2   |       |
|                             | Llangollen RD          | -4.6          | -6.6    | -3.3    | -14.4   |       |
|                             | Llanrwst RD            | -1.9          | -2.8    | 0.0     | -4.6    |       |
|                             | Llansilin RD           | -2.0          | -4.5    | 0.3     | -6.2    |       |
|                             | Ruthin RD              | -3.8          | -8.1    | 0.5     | -10.3   |       |
|                             | St. Asaph RD           | -1.8          | -6.2    | -6.9    | -14.9   |       |
|                             | Uwchaled RD            | -4.7          | 0.5     | 1.2     | -3.0    |       |
|                             | Wrexham RD             | -3.4          | -7.4    | -2.6    | -13.3   |       |
| <b>Flintshire</b>           | Buckley UD             | -1.7          | -3.1    | -0.9    | -5.7    |       |
|                             | Flint MB               | -12.8         | -9.7    | -2.6    | -25.1   |       |
|                             | Connah's Quay UD       | -0.9          | -2.6    | -1.0    | -4.5    |       |
|                             | Holywell UD            | -10.1         | -16.9   | 5.9     | -21.2   |       |
|                             | Mold UD                | -7.0          | -9.9    | -6.4    | -23.3   |       |
|                             | Prestatyn UD           | -15.1         | -21.0   | 4.0     | -32.1   |       |
|                             | Rhyl UD                | -8.8          | -15.4   | 3.3     | -20.8   |       |
|                             | Hawarden RD            | -3.2          | -3.6    | -1.6    | -8.3    |       |
|                             | Holywell RD            | -5.3          | -10.5   | -1.5    | -17.3   |       |
|                             | Overton RD             | -0.2          | -0.5    | 0.3     | -0.4    |       |
|                             | St. Asaph              | -8.7          | -14.3   | 0.0     | -23.0   |       |
|                             | <b>Montgomeryshire</b> | Llanfyllin MB | -4.7    | -3.5    | -4.0    | -12.2 |
|                             |                        | Llanidloes MB | -8.6    | -8.3    | -1.2    | -18.1 |
| Machynlleth UD              |                        | -3.0          | -0.6    | -4.6    | -8.3    |       |
| Montgomery MB               |                        | -0.3          | -0.3    | 2.4     | 1.9     |       |
| Newtown & Llanllwchaiarn UD |                        | -2.5          | 0.3     | 0.6     | -1.7    |       |
| Welshpool MB                |                        | -1.7          | -0.3    | -0.1    | -2.6    |       |
| Forden RD                   |                        | -0.5          | -0.3    | -0.5    | -1.4    |       |
| Llanfyllin RD               |                        | -2.9          | -3.4    | -2.4    | -8.8    |       |
| Machynlleth RD              |                        | -0.7          | -2.2    | 0.2     | -2.7    |       |
| Newtown & Llanidloes RD     |                        | -3.5          | -3.7    | -4.0    | -11.2   |       |

Source: Census reports, 1901-1931.

Few contemporary studies have focused on these changes, however Mari Williams and Gwenfair Parry's work on the 1891 census in Wales does examine the way in which the linguistic composition of a community was affected by the influence of new settlers. Many of the points Parry raises in her case study of Rhyl in 1891 can be applied to the inter-war

period. Owing to its popularity as a holiday resort, even at the turn of the twentieth century, Rhyl was becoming increasingly anglicized by 1891. The establishment of the railway in 1848 meant that it was easily accessible by rail or road, and thus attracted visitors from England. Indeed more than a quarter of its inhabitants were monoglot English speakers. Because of the demands of the service sector, which employed most of the district's working population, pressure was exerted to learn English:

‘...there was growing pressure on the Welsh speakers to become bilingual, and although the mother tongue remained strong in some homes and as the language of religion, English was given pride of place in the schools and reigned supreme in commerce and in the public and professional sectors. Only a minority of small children and elderly people were enumerated as monoglot Welsh speakers and for a large section of the population the language of their daily life was English.’<sup>45</sup>

Demographic growth did not necessarily herald the extinction of the Welsh language. In the Denbighshire town of Rhosllannerchrugog demographic growth and a Welsh culture co-existed. Here ninety per cent of the population spoke Welsh.<sup>46</sup> However in contrast to Rhyl many of the new population had not travelled a great distance in search of new employment. Gwenfair Parry notes:

‘Welsh speakers poured in from agricultural parishes to the west, and by maintaining strong links with their rural backgrounds their attachment to their language and native culture was reinforced.’<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Gwenfair Parry & Mari Williams, The Welsh Language and the 1891 Census, Cardiff 1999, p.351.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.361.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.377.

It would seem that this was an essential factor in ensuring the language's preservation. Welsh remained the language of the hearth, the community and of worship. It is significant that monoglot English speakers tended to be confined to occupations like domestic service. Nonetheless it should also be noted that the majority of Rhosllannerchrugog's residents were able to speak English. By this time children, in particular, were encouraged by their parents to develop their bilingual skills:

‘This Anglicization was an indication of the parents’ desire to steep their children in the ‘language of progress’, and there can be no doubt that education was an important influence in determining the children’s language of play and the language they spoke at home.’<sup>49</sup>

Yet this linguistic diversity was consistently under threat due to the town's proximity to the English border. In 1891 Rhosllannerchrugog ‘remained an island of Welshness in the bilingual frontier zone’. Its location meant that the status of the language was consistently under threat, due to the perceived advantages held by the English language.<sup>50</sup> By the late nineteenth century the market town of Llanidloes, in Montgomeryshire, was in a similar position. As a formerly thriving commercial centre and easily accessible from the English border, tradesmen from many parts of the United Kingdom visited the area. The town's position in the woollen industry during the early to mid nineteenth century meant that English had long been associated with progress and prosperity. Even though by the end of the century the industry had collapsed, the status of the English language remained undiminished. Whilst being a monoglot English speaker was acceptable in virtually all parts of North East Wales by the late nineteenth century, being a monoglot Welsh speaker was not. Parents recognised the necessity of being able to converse in English, as it was

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, pp.363-4.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pp.363-4.

perceived to improve social and employment opportunities. Thus a local mentality also contributed to the decline of the Welsh language. This was certainly the case in Llanidloes. David Llewlyn Jones discovered that in 1891 in-migration had little to do with its decline. Nearly half of the town's inhabitants were bilingual, whilst 44 per cent - largely native born - could only speak English. In contrast to other North Wales counties English was the language of both religion and officialdom:

‘...Llanidloes was very much a bilingual town in which Anglicizing trends were uppermost. The Welsh language was rarely used in any official capacity and it was evident that its position as the language of the hearth was also under considerable threat as increasing numbers of Welsh-speaking parents failed to transmit knowledge of the native tongue to their offspring.’<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the ‘decline of Welsh’ was not a direct political issue, as it was in the 1980s, and it was possible for parties to embrace both English and Welsh speaking activists. By the turn of the twentieth century the prominence of the Welsh language was being eroded in all but the most rural areas of North East Wales. Invariably this had far reaching implications. It affected society's cultural and social identity, as the language signified so much more than a means of communication. It represented a cultural heritage. One clear indication of shifting linguistic trends was the language used for worship. As has been well documented Nonconformity, the Welsh language and Liberalism had long established roots. They represented the antithesis of the oppressive and exploitative embodiment of the monoglot English landowner and his affiliation with the Anglican Church and the Conservative party. Moreover they shared many intrinsic values and beliefs. Temperance, Disestablishment, peace and individual liberty were all issues that united these groups. Yet

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.377.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.331.

the significance and centrality of religion to the lives of the working classes of Wales was deeper than simply an urge to rebel against the establishment. During this period K. O. Morgan rightly points out that ‘nonconformity was responsible for almost every significant and worthwhile aspect of social and cultural activity in late nineteenth century Wales’.<sup>52</sup> Moreover before the 1870 Forster Act ensured the provision of elementary education, the chapel offered one of the only means of educating children in Welsh free of charge. In this respect the Welsh language acted as a cohesive bond linking elements of society together, and associating the Welsh with religion, care for the ‘people’, morality and respectability. The dilution of this culture challenged these values. Migrants from outside Wales settling in this region could not have possessed the same sympathy and insight into the prominence of the Welsh chapel. Thus the changing language and the consistent decline of religious worship from the start of the twentieth century onwards *could* have contributed to the weakening of those institutions it was traditionally associated with – the most notable being the Liberal party.

Yet the impact of such changes was far from simple, the consequences far from automatic. Many of these in-migrants were often religious themselves. If their demands to worship in English were ignored by Welsh Nonconformists they might be embraced by the Anglican church – frequently associated with Conservatism. However, many chapels recognised the necessity of change in order to cater for the new population. It is significant, for example, that by 1891 in Rhyl only around half of the town’s chapels worshipped in Welsh.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps more significantly, whilst formal Nonconformity continued to be an important aspect of community life in this region, regardless of language, it became increasingly distanced from politics. The 1910 Report of the Church of England in Wales confirmed that nearly half of Flintshire’s residents were Nonconformist, whilst only 13 per cent were

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<sup>52</sup> K. O. Morgan, Rebirth of a Nation: Wales, 1880-1980, Oxford, 1981, p.18.



Anglican, but there is nothing to suggest that these people attended chapels and churches, or that this structured politics.<sup>54</sup> Stephen Koss observes that in the aftermath of the Great War the party could not take this support for granted because other factors influenced political decisions.<sup>55</sup> Moreover D. W. Bebbington argues 'by 1910 the period of the Nonconformist conscience had come to an end'. Religious inspiration rarely motivated political actions.<sup>56</sup> By the late 1920s congregations had declined markedly. Robert Pope notes:

'The decline in church attendance...was caused by various factors. Changing working practices, greater leisure opportunities, the aftermath of war and plain apathy all played a part. What is certain is that very often men had personal and individual reasons for forsaking Nonconformity and Christian practice generally.'<sup>57</sup>

A younger generation of worshippers were not attending chapel in the same numbers or regularity as their forefathers. The *Denbighshire Free Press* highlighted this trend in 1929. It had learnt that the numbers of people attending Calvinistic Methodist Sunday schools in North Wales were in decline. Between 1902 and 1927 attendances had fallen from 115,340 to 87,728, despite the fact that the population had grown.<sup>58</sup> This was indicative of a more general trend, as Pope outlines. Society was changing. Old habits, loyalties and values were gradually evolving and were replaced by new ideas and innovations. Nonconformity needed to extend its appeal – attracting both new comers to the area and natives to their congregations. They could no longer rely even on those who had been raised within a Welsh speaking culture to come through their doors to worship as increased recreation

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<sup>53</sup> G. Parry & M. Williams, op. cit, p.339. Five out nine of the town's religious institutions worshipped in Welsh in 1891.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Parry, *Flintshire Nonconformist statistics for the year 1905*, Mold, 1905.

<sup>55</sup> S. Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics*, London 1975, pp.7-10.

<sup>56</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience*, London 1982, p.160.

<sup>57</sup> R. Pope, *Building Jerusalem: Nonconformity, Labour and the Social Question in Wales, 1906-1939*, Cardiff 1998, p.241.

time and opportunities meant that other activities were more appealing. If religion was an influence, it was not because people voted on denominational issues, but because religion signalled 'localness' (for the locally born) or 'respectability' (for others). For Welsh communities under threat, a Welsh-speaking candidate might signify security from a changing world. Religion and language – in their broader cultural sense – provided a challenge and opportunity for parties, but few automatic and assured consequences for newer and younger voters. It provided the Liberals with a core of older supporters, even into the 1920s, but all recognised this was not enough and that it was not a secure political base.

### Conclusion

The cumulative effect of the social and economic changes North East Wales underwent between the late nineteenth century and the outbreak of the Second World War was to alter its character and nature. Although not all areas were affected to the same degree, the region's evolving and diversifying infrastructure had implications for all political parties. Not only were the industries of Flintshire and Wrexham and coastal resort towns attracting new workers and their families to the area in the 1920s, they were also enticing rural workers with the promise of improved conditions and better pay and opportunities. Thus in the predominantly agricultural districts of Denbighshire and Montgomeryshire depopulation was a major problem. If some areas experienced economic and cultural change, others experienced economic and cultural stagnation. Local authorities and politicians who represented the region's inhabitants were required to be flexible. The depression of the 1930s was a further test of their resolve and adaptability. The constituencies of North Wales presented a variety of social contexts and a variety of political challenges. However both contexts and challenges evolved during this period as new demands and concerns emerged, from the scale of tuberculosis to the demands of an

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<sup>58</sup> Denbighshire Free Press, 1 June 1929.

ageing population. Thus, if social circumstances determined politics, we would expect to find the Liberals secure in stagnant rural areas, but facing increased competition as other parts of the region grew. Moreover eventually we would expect see the party's hold disappear altogether in both mining areas and those areas that had experienced significant in-migration and cultural change.

In reality partisan allegiances did not alter overnight. The Liberal party's domination of the political landscape did not rapidly decline in the aftermath of the First World War, even in constituencies like Flintshire and Wrexham which experienced the most significant changes. The change was gradual. Moreover, Liberalism successfully managed to embrace social change in Flintshire. This implies that either the Liberal party was recognising the evolving needs of their different constituencies, or that partisan loyalty was not affected by material change. These are the intrinsic questions that this study will address.

## *Chapter 2*

### *A party divided? The Liberal party, 1918-1924*

The upheaval caused by the Great War and the subsequent political realignment that was witnessed in Britain sapped the strength of the Liberal party. As the country continued to be led by a Liberal Prime Minister until 1922, the divisions that had emerged within the party made it difficult to challenge government. Both John Turner and Michael Freedon have also shown that the widening of the party's ideological spectrum during this period was ultimately detrimental to its fate.<sup>1</sup> The First World War challenged the core values of Liberalism, and forced party members to choose between pragmatism and principle. The debate over the introduction of conscription is a key example of this dilemma. Whilst some Liberals were willing to sacrifice the idea of personal liberty during these difficult times others, like Arthur Ponsonby and Charles Trevelyan, were unable to compromise their ideals and left to join Labour. Thus, the party emerged from War ragged, divided and full of recriminations. Moreover the situation was to get a great deal worse before getting better.

Whilst the electoral demise of Liberalism has been primarily attributed to factors like the emergence of Labour and the extension of the franchise, few studies have examined in-depth why and how the party remained a vital and credible force in some regions during the inter-war years. Yet it is important to understand the fact that Liberalism could be adaptable and its organisation on constituency level viable, despite developments in Westminster. North East Wales is one such area that retained its faith in the 'old party'. In the immediate aftermath of

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Freedon, *Liberalism Divided*, Oxford 1986 & John Turner, *British politics and the Great War: Conflict and Coalition 1915-1918*, London 1992.

war the party's grassroots were not damaged to the same extent by national forces. Indeed, each of the four constituency organisations remained in tact. Although dissenting voices were to be heard within these groups, they were initially few and far between.

During the turbulent Coalition years the party in this region did well to remain relatively unified despite the fact that the forces which once provided the basis of Liberal support were gradually declining. As chapter 1 illustrates, Nonconformity and the prevalence of the Welsh language and its culture, were being diluted and coming under increasing threat. The challenge was to retain existing support, whilst at the same time appealing to new residents - on the same terms as their opponents. This was a daunting prospect. Nevertheless the Liberals had tradition, rooted allegiances, and the support and legitimacy provided by a Welsh establishment that was overwhelmingly Liberal, on their side. Whatever was happening nationally, the Liberals in North East Wales started with a huge advantage.

In all four constituencies the party occupied a powerful position until at least the mid 1930s. Yet the methods developed to retain their standing contrasted greatly, suggesting a lack of co-ordination, and minimal support from the national party. As a result the constituencies were left to their own devices. Nor was there a mechanism for influencing the 'national' approach. There was no 'lesson from Wales' that could be forced on UK leaders. The individual Liberal Associations fought to consolidate their position, but there was no broader cohesion or even unity in the region. Rarely did divisional associations focus on the long term – short term survival took priority. This chapter explains the continuing Liberal success, whilst recognizing its intrinsic weaknesses and the erosion of its competitive position.

Initially Liberal success can be attributed to the region's cultural character. It represented many values and traditions which were important to society. Secondly, in some areas it faced little or no political competition. The latter factor was certainly the case in Denbigh and Montgomeryshire. Both Labour and the Conservatives were slow to flourish in these divisions. Nonetheless the impotence of the opposition parties, particularly in Montgomeryshire, was not necessarily a positive development for the Liberal party. Years of uncontested general elections and the strength of the Liberal 'establishment' had bred an air of apathy amongst ordinary voters. Furthermore the dominance of David Davies, the 'uncrowned King of Montgomeryshire', and his lack of interest in Westminster meant that the party was not viewed as a positive and dynamic force.<sup>2</sup> In such a rural constituency, where society remained largely unchanged throughout this period, the party could, to a certain extent, rely on these historic factors. However this was not the case in those divisions which had undergone considerable demographic and economic change during the early 1920s. They were required to change their brand of Liberalism if they were to ensure their political survival. Throughout the inter-war period the Flintshire party demonstrated such political astuteness. The rapid growth of Conservatism and the gradual expansion of Labour's electoral base forced the party to constantly monitor its standing within the constituency. In Wrexham the party vied with the newly formed Labour party for the seat. Despite the fact that this was considered an archetypal 'Labour' constituency, even here the Liberals held on to a substantial portion of their vote. It took some decades for it to be regarded a 'safe' Labour seat. Change for the Liberals, it would seem, was a necessity, but also a possibility.

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<sup>2</sup> Western Mail, 25 November 1927.

### The Coupon Election

The 1918 election was to be an important milestone for the Liberal party. The Boundary Commission of 1917 had modified the composition of the four constituencies, to varying degrees. The borough seats of Flint, Montgomery and Denbigh had all been abolished, whilst a new constituency was created in Wrexham. Furthermore, apart from David Davies in Montgomeryshire, the other three candidates were contesting their respective seats for the first time. Similarly to the position nationwide, all divisional Liberal parties had been inactive for several years when the election was called. Although the war could be cited as the main reason for this, in some cases (e.g. Denbigh and Montgomeryshire) apathy and complacency were responsible. Although, ultimately, all the candidates were successful, the path to Parliament was smoother for some than for others. Table 2.1 shows that only in Denbigh and Wrexham were contests held.

Table 2.1

Result of 1918 Election in North East Wales

| <i>Constituency</i>    | <i>Candidate</i> | <i>Party</i> | <i>Number of votes</i> | <i>Percentage of vote</i> | <i>Majority</i> | <i>Turnout</i> |
|------------------------|------------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <i>Denbigh</i>         | D.S. Davies      | Co. Lib      | 14773                  | 83.3                      | 66.6%           | 58.2%          |
|                        | E. T. John       | Lab          | 2958                   | 16.7                      | -               |                |
| <i>Flintshire</i>      | T. H. Parry      | Co. Lib      | Unopposed              | -                         | -               | -              |
| <i>Montgomeryshire</i> | D. Davies        | Lib          | Unopposed              | -                         | -               | -              |
| <i>Wrexham</i>         | R. J. Thomas     | Co. Lib      | 20874                  | 76.3                      | 52.6%           | 69.7%          |
|                        | H. Hughes        | Lab          | 6500                   | 23.7                      | -               |                |

Source: F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, Glasgow 1969.

In the rural seat of Montgomeryshire David Davies faced no opposition, even though he had refused the 'coupon'. Primarily this was because there were no 'live' Conservative or Labour

organisations to challenge him. The recently eradicated Borough seat had been occupied by the Conservative Sir Edward Pryce-Jones, but he stood aside to allow Davies a secure passage.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the lack of a Conservative infrastructure in the division contributed to Pryce-Jones' decision, it also reflected his approval of Davies' cautious, conservative, approach to politics - amongst Tory elements he was a popular choice.<sup>4</sup> Yet although his political views continued to be to the 'right' of the Liberal party, he refused to openly support the Coalition. In a letter to Frank Guest he explained:

‘The pressure which is being applied from Headquarters, and the labeling of candidates, is greatly resented in the constituency, and, so far as my information goes, this feeling is pretty general all over the country.’<sup>5</sup>

Thus, he campaigned under an Independent Liberal banner, reluctant to express his admiration for either Lloyd George or Asquith. However, his papers reveal a deeper and underlying reason for his refusal of the coupon. Formerly he had been a close friend of Lloyd George. Having been appointed his PPS in 1916, their relationship quickly deteriorated thereafter. Increasingly Davies became more critical of the war effort, as a consequence a gulf began to emerge between them. Ultimately Davies was forced to resign. In his resignation letter he said:

‘I have felt for some time past that my labours at No. 10 were more or less futile, and that our views on various questions were becoming more and more

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<sup>3</sup> J. Graham Jones, ‘Montgomeryshire politics: Lloyd George, David Davies and the Green Book’, Montgomery Collections, vol. 72, 1984, p.79.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.79.

<sup>5</sup> J. Graham Jones, *op. cit*, p.82.



divergent.’<sup>6</sup>

It might be thought this was a rarity in Wales, that Liberals who were so openly hostile to Lloyd George and the Coalition could not survive. However Davies encountered nothing but praise from the local press. Montgomeryshire’s local newspapers had little appetite for a political contest in 1918. Davies’ stand for Welsh Home Rule, Devolution, the Peace Treaty, establishment of a League of Nations and social reform<sup>7</sup>, made him an attractive proposition.

The *Montgomeryshire Express* declared:

‘...there is not a political ripple indicative of desire for a contest in Montgomeryshire. And for obvious reasons nobody affects a surprise. If, as is suggested on all sides, the country will be best served by a Coalition Government during the remainder of the war and the period of reconstruction, few, to whichever party belonging, could wish to supplant the present County Member...’<sup>8</sup>

The Flintshire Liberal association publicly displayed a greater degree of tact towards the formation of the Coalition, although their minute book reveals that while national divisions failed to physically divide them, the strength of feeling for the competing Liberal factions was unmistakable. Indeed, at a meeting dominated by Asquithian supporters in 1919 it was recorded:

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<sup>6</sup> David Davies to David Lloyd George, 25 October, 1917, Lloyd George MS, F/83/10/9, HLRO.

<sup>7</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 30 November 1918.

<sup>8</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 19 November 1918.

‘The embarrassment felt throughout the constituency was largely dwelt upon and the opinion was general that the Coalition form of government was most unsatisfactory.’<sup>9</sup>

Strong allegiances towards either Lloyd George or Asquith were apparent within the association. The atmosphere could be tense at times. The underlying animosities that existed can be seen in the frustrations of one of the association’s most esteemed members, Henry Gladstone. Writing to his brother Herbert (himself a former Liberal Minister), he complained that Lloyd George:

‘... has now given the wrong tone financially and morally to all his Government and underlings, and it is now impossible for him to change, so I agree with you that almost any man would be better as Prime Minister than he.’<sup>10</sup>

As the youngest son of the former Liberal Premier, Henry’s views were held in high regard. Indeed high-ranking officials from the Abingdon Street headquarters frequently consulted him on party matters.<sup>11</sup> Despite the fact that his reservations were openly shared by other leading local figures, such as Thomas Waterhouse,<sup>12</sup> it was a Coalitionist who succeeded in winning the association’s nomination in 1918. Thomas Parry was returned unopposed to the seat.

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<sup>9</sup> Flintshire Liberal Association Minute Book, 1919-1939, D/DM 350, FRO, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> H. N. Gladstone to H. Gladstone, 30 August 1919, Glynne-Gladstone MS, DM GG 964, FRO.

<sup>11</sup> H. N. Gladstone’s correspondence files hold many letters from 21 Abingdon Street (Liberal Headquarters) requesting financial support or his advice.

<sup>12</sup> Significantly, Waterhouse was one of the founding members of the Lloyd George anti-coalition alliance.

Nonetheless privately Gladstone was unhappy with the way events had unfolded. Briefing his brother about the new representative he said:

‘The member is Colonel Parry, who fought well in the war, and is a son of Thomas Parry, the timber merchant of Mold, and old faithful Liberal, who is Chairman of the Flintshire Liberal Association. Herbert Lewis managed to push Parry as his successor, practically without any consideration, and as he was absent at the time on duty he got in without any special reference to any coupon or anything else’<sup>13</sup>

Again, a Liberal tradition – and a rather paternalistic form of politics – was preserved. However this practice was causing controversy. Herbert Lewis’ patronage and approval of Parry’s candidacy reflects the dated and undemocratic nature of some of the party’s customs. This was a fact that was resented by Henry Gladstone. Yet in his own case, family background and ‘worthiness’ remained important factors in his high position. These not only influenced the hierarchy of the Liberal party in Flintshire – but generally in North East Wales. Only in 1928 were these trends reversed in Flintshire, following Parry’s departure. As the 1920s progressed it became apparent that potential candidates needed to display other merits, apart from family pedigree, if they were to be adopted and to compete on the same stage as the Conservatives and Labour. It emerged soon after Parry’s passage to Westminster in 1918 that he was not ideally suited to constituency life. Although in the first instance he was dogged by ill-health, he was by no means an active politician when he recovered. He had little

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<sup>13</sup> H. N. Gladstone to H. Gladstone, 30 August 1919, Glynne-Gladstone MS, DM GG 964, FRO.

involvement in the association's decision making as they successfully steered the party through the general elections of the early 1920s.

A Coalitionist also stood in Wrexham. Sir Robert J. Thomas was an enthusiastic Lloyd George supporter and was totally at ease with his party's arrangement with the Conservatives. Indeed mirroring national trends, he successfully convinced the division's Conservative association to support his candidacy.<sup>14</sup> At the heart of his campaign lay a desire to portray the formation of a Coalition government as the most patriotic and beneficial development for the country. He emphasised the commitment to reconstruction, free trade and the formation of a League of Nations.<sup>15</sup> His victory came as no surprise. The Coalition rode high in the popularity stakes during the 'khaki' election. Moreover Thomas himself boasted a wide personal appeal, unlike his Labour rival. A similar scenario arose in Denbigh. Here David S. Davies faced E. T. John, the former Liberal MP for Denbigh Borough, as his opponent. Again, partisan loyalties overcame personal affections. Despite the fact David S. Davies was not as renowned as John, his victory was comprehensive. Table 2.1 shows that the Coalition captured 80 per cent of the vote.

Yet although the Liberals' had an apparently secure grip on the Denbigh constituency all was not well within their ranks. Indeed the suspicion and frustrations that characterized the local party very much echoed national events. The first clear indication of this tension was conveyed following an article in the *Denbighshire Free Press*, reporting the possibility that an opposing 'Independent' Liberal candidate was to stand. Although the prospective candidate,

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<sup>14</sup> *Wrexham Advertiser*, 16 November 1918.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 23 November 1918.

Aneurin O. Evans (a local solicitor), eventually decided not to contest the seat, the level of support he gained from some Liberal quarters illustrated the inherent potential for conflict that lay within the party.<sup>16</sup> Thus, following the 1918 election what seemed to threaten Liberalism was not the emergence of new political parties or an extended electorate but the Liberal party itself.

### *The organisation and structure of the Liberal Party, 1919 – 1922*

The divisions that had permeated Liberal ranks on both a local and national level were identified as serious and potentially fatal by some of the party's most perceptive officials. In North East Wales a few committed activists strove to encourage a more united and cohesive Liberal front. Amongst this minority was J. Morris Roberts, the agent for Denbigh. Not only did he recognize the party's inherent weaknesses, he also highlighted the need to rectify organisational deficiencies. Propaganda was of vital importance in his mind, and one area that different associations could work together to develop. Writing to the *Daily Post* journalist E. Morgan Humphries in 1920, he discussed his attempts to persuade the party's London headquarters to assist with these efforts. The talks were on-going at Abingdon Street. It was J. Morris Roberts' aim to see greater co-operation emerging, particularly between the Denbigh, Flintshire and Caernarfonshire associations.<sup>17</sup> Whilst little emerged from Roberts' labours his renewed attempts to encourage greater co-operation illustrates the disinclination of most constituency associations to foster a broader vision. Throughout the Coalition years these divisional parties generally continued to act in isolation. Some were more successful than

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<sup>16</sup> Denbighshire Free Press, 7 December 1918.

<sup>17</sup> J. Morris Roberts to E. Morgan Humphries, 6 June 1920, E. Morgan Humphries MS, A/3030, NLW.

others. Some associations reviewed strategies and tried to strengthen their position. However others took years to come to terms with the aftermath of the political upheaval of 1916-18.

Indeed it would seem that during the early 1920s party officials in London failed to fully appreciate the difficulties some associations faced. Often the vision espoused by officials at party headquarters contrasted greatly with the reality of constituency politics. A report prepared by Sir William Edge in 1922, on behalf of the Lloyd George camp, shows that in relation to North East Wales they were out of touch with activities at grassroots level. The document outlined how constituency parties should ideally operate.<sup>18</sup> However few organisations could have realistically satisfied their expectations.

William Edge asserted that the first priority of divisional parties was to promote the 'revival and the regeneration of Liberalism'.<sup>19</sup> In this apparently widely circulated document he outlined the main functions of local parties were to: arrange meetings, distribute literature, registration, arrange social gatherings, fight local elections and 'generally keep Liberalism alive'. Where the strategy came undone, however, was that these organizations were to be largely self-financed. Since 1906 constituency parties had been responsible for financing themselves. Officially this was seen as an important means to keep the associations 'alive'. Fund-raising necessitated activity. Edge's report revealed that complacency and a lack of motivation had previously been a serious problem, which had proved to have a detrimental, and 'fatal', affect on healthy organisations.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless headquarters were powerless to improve the situation. Their ties with the divisional parties had weakened. Thus they could

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<sup>18</sup> Sir W. Edge, 'General Principles of Organisation', Lloyd George MS, G/6/10/3, HLRO.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.1.

now only advise. Although ideally communication was to be maintained between the constituency parties and Abingdon Street, there is little evidence to suggest such a relationship existed with regard to the four divisions in this study. Despite the fact that a Mr. L. Edwards and Mrs. Price White, had been appointed by its central office to assist with 'provincial organisation' in North Wales, in practice neither newspaper reports nor party minutes record either their presence or assistance at any constituency party meeting.<sup>21</sup> In reality associations were steered by their agents. As headquarters had envisaged, they served a vital role.<sup>22</sup> Underlining this message W. S. Belcher reminded agents in their journal in 1919:

'The quality of its [the Party] machinery, and the effectiveness of its organisation, in the constituencies, both of which are at the very foundation of its national success, depend upon us individually, upon our creative and fostering care. Let us face once again and realise more clearly our high responsibility in this matter for it touches our honour closely.'<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless the success enjoyed by the agent was largely dependent on the dedication of party activists. Thus, one of the main reasons so many of the goals laid out by William Edge were unfulfilled was due to a lack of enthusiasm on the ground. Few agents had the drive or support to instigate change. Whilst in North East Wales all divisional Liberal associations employed agents, only the Flintshire party's agent, Gomer Owen, understood the necessity of extending the appeal of Liberalism and successfully achieved his goals. The most perceptive

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> F. E. Guest, Coalition Liberal Organisation Annual Report for 1920, Lloyd George MS, F/168/2/16, HLRO.

<sup>22</sup> Sir W. Edge, 'Liberal Organisation', Lloyd George MS, G/6 10, c1922 (n.d.), HLRO

<sup>23</sup> W. S. Belcher, 'Musings while meandering', The Liberal Agent, 97, July 1919, p.23.

party workers appreciated the need to improve organisation in this constituency. The vastly changing landscape of post-war Flintshire brought into sharp focus an urgency to ensure Liberal values permeated the heart of new communities. Part of this strategy was to 'reintroduce' Liberalism to local communities. The formation of Liberal discussion groups was encouraged in rural areas, along with public meetings 'to revive the interest of the people in the principles of Liberalism'.<sup>24</sup> However the promotion of this initiative was short-lived. By November 1919, the party's executive committee advised that these groups should be disbanded. It was their belief that the turmoil of the national party would reflect badly upon them on a local level. Instead a sub-committee was appointed to consider how to improve organisation.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the other associations, the Flintshire organisation was also aware of the appeal of their opponents. Addressing the Executive for the first time since his election, Thomas Parry conceded that the Labour Party's new programme was both 'attractive and alluring' and moreover, nationally, 'people were going over to Labour because they were the only active Party'.<sup>26</sup>

Significantly, the party continued to distance itself from the divisional Conservative association. Indeed the Tories' attempts to form Coalition pacts in county and local councils elections were rejected. Moreover the Conservative minutes of 1919 reflect the Liberals' hostility towards them. Referring to a meeting with Gomer Owen to discuss a possible pact, it was reported that he had rejected the proposal outright, stating that such an understanding only existed in Parliament. This response had an important bearing on the Tory position. The Liberals' actions confirmed Tory suspicions of a 'secret working arrangement' between the

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<sup>24</sup> Flintshire Liberal Association Minutes, 12 July 1919.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 26 November 1919.



Liberals and Labour.<sup>27</sup> This encouraged them to adopt a hardline approach against the Liberals. Whilst in other constituencies the two parties worked well together, in Flintshire the Liberals considered themselves too progressive to co-operate with the Conservatives. They regarded themselves as the party which strove to represent the interests of workers. It is significant that while the Liberals remained a unified body, Labour struggled to make a decisive breakthrough in the constituency. Indeed the Liberals' decision not to enter a pact with the Conservatives inadvertently strengthened their position. The statistical analysis collated by A. H. Taylor confirms that Liberal success was more likely to be preserved if they shunned Conservative alliances, of any sort, during this period. He notes that Tory advance was impeded in constituencies where the Liberals broke or resisted electoral pacts in 1918 and 1931. Not only was the Conservative vote restricted by this, the Liberals also sidelined Labour. Taylor makes the point that if on one occasion the Liberals supported the Conservatives they inadvertently 'encouraged those who wished to oppose the government to vote Labour, and either encouraged Liberals who wished to support the government to vote Conservative or themselves become dependent on Conservative support.'<sup>28</sup> On a national level the Tories were the stronger of the two parties. As a consequence Liberal support had the potential to be converted to Conservative votes – and threaten the 'status' of the Liberal party.

Whilst the Liberals and Conservatives represented the 'left' and 'right' of politics, Labour's appeal was marginal in Flintshire.<sup>29</sup> In Wrexham this situation could not be replicated. Following the selection of a Coalition candidate in 1918, the Liberals' ties with the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 31 January 1920.

<sup>27</sup> Unionist and Constitutionalist Flintshire Association minutes, 7 January 1922, D/DM 307/2, FRO.

<sup>28</sup> A. H. Taylor, 'The effects of electoral pacts on the decline of the Liberal Party', British Journal of Political Science, vol 3, 1973, p.246.

Conservatives intensified. Although during the 1920s and 1930s it was the Liberals who were the dominant force in this awkward relationship, their actions did not strengthen their electoral base in the long term. As Taylor's thesis implies, a willingness to align, on certain occasions, with a party that enjoyed such national success would eventually lead to their downfall.

Given that the Labour party was such a visible threat to the Wrexham Liberals it is significant to note the lack of appetite they displayed to organise their ranks. Indeed, up to 1922 they were relatively inactive.<sup>30</sup> Like many other seats in North Wales where the Coalition Liberals triumphed, they adopted a relaxed approach to organisation, which in the long term contributed towards their demise. Their representative, R. J. Thomas, devoted most of his energies to his business interests. Meetings were infrequent. Indeed a gathering of the Executive Committee, convened in the December of 1920 was reported to have been the first in over a year.<sup>31</sup> Despite the strengthening of Labour as a local political force and the increasing social deprivation witnessed in the area, neither the members nor their representative were motivated to discuss ways in which conditions could be improved.

Evidently, though, the Wrexham association did not feel it necessary to alter their style. Following Thomas' announcement that he was to resign from the seat at the next election [after accepting nomination from the Anglesey Liberals] a successor was chosen. Evan R. Davies' selection as Thomas' successor was not welcomed in all quarters. Whilst he was cast in a similar ideological mould, allegations and insinuations of nepotism followed his adoption.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.245.

<sup>30</sup> The pro-Liberal *Wrexham Leader* implied that meetings were infrequent between 1918 and 1922.

<sup>31</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 20 December, 1920. The meeting had only been arranged following a request from one of its members, R. Isfryn Jones, to see the divisional Party renounce its ties with the Coalition. In Wrexham the

Not only had he been a member of Lloyd George's Secretariat in Downing Street, he was even related to the Prime Minister. In a letter to E. Morgan Humphries, Richard Davies, a high ranking party official working in the London headquarters, quipped 'is Wales to be a close corporation for Mr. Lloyd George's family and entourage?'.<sup>32</sup> Although Davies' credentials were strong, his candidacy was not ideal. Despite the fact that he was a solicitor by profession and a well-respected 'pillar' of the community in the Pwllheli area for a quarter of a century, he was unsympathetic to the plight of the miners. He shared Lloyd George's distaste for the industrial policy adopted by Labour.<sup>33</sup> He regarded industrial unrest as a menace to society and was dubious about the power held by the trade unions.<sup>34</sup>

During the first few months following his adoption he tirelessly toured the constituency. His strategy was to distance the mining community from the rest of the electorate, and create divisions within the working classes.<sup>35</sup> In one of his first public meetings he branded the Labour Party and its affiliated bodies as 'extremists' and, like his predecessor, attacked the policy of nationalisation which they espoused.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless given the significant proportion of miners within the electorate it is questionable whether this was the most effective tactical stance to adopt if the Liberals wished to remain a party of the 'left'. The coal strike of 1920 and the lockouts of the subsequent year hit the area very hard. The poverty endured by the miners and their families was evident within most communities. Around this time even the

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allegiance of the party's most senior figures lay squarely with Lloyd George. Needless to say a substantial majority rejected the motion, and consequently Isfryn Jones defected to the Independent Liberals shortly after.

<sup>32</sup> R. H. Davies to E. M. Humphries, 16 November 1921, E. M. Humphries MS, A/453, NLW.

<sup>33</sup> Sir R. J. Thomas announced his resignation in September 1921.

<sup>34</sup> His views were very much in line with those held by Lloyd George. Lloyd George's attitude to Labour and unionism is dealt with extensively in C. Wrigley, Lloyd George and the challenge of Labour: The post war coalition, 1918-1922, New York 1990.

<sup>35</sup> Wrexham Leader, 6 January, 1922.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

most conservative of columnists in the local press were sympathetic to the suffering, if not so to the miners' cause. This was not a militant hotbed of unrest, unlike areas of the North East of England or South Wales, where the language of Labour politics was doctrinal and at times extreme. Progressively minded Liberals knew this, yet Davies ignored these factors to adhere to Lloyd George's 'Coalition' tactics.

In Montgomeryshire the party's machinery did not need to be as tactically astute. Although little time was devoted to organisation, the divisional association met on a fairly regular basis and moreover little conflict existed amongst members. Typically, they were consistently supportive of David Davies' wishes and whims. Having voted with the Coalition for some years, Davies finally made a stand against the Government in the March of 1920. Believing that Lloyd George's policies were driving the country's youth into the arms of Labour, he announced, during an association meeting that he was no longer willing to support a Government full of 'shameless opportunists'.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, so strong were his feelings that the following month he felt compelled to express his opposition in a letter to *The Times*.<sup>38</sup> Davies' divisional party fully supported his decision. During the same meeting he spoke of the 'dark days' that were facing the party. Revealing nothing of his personal animosity towards the Prime Minister, he spoke of the dangers of Liberalism and Conservatism becoming entwined.<sup>39</sup>

For much of 1921 David Davies travelled the length and breadth of Wales addressing audiences about one of his all-consuming passions - the League of Nations. Nonetheless this

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<sup>37</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 30 March 1920.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 6 April 1920.

enthusiastic campaign meant that his parliamentary duties slipped. Indeed, in January 1921 the *Montgomeryshire County Times* claimed that, along with Henry Haydn Jones of Merioneth, he had been neglecting parliamentary duties. It was claimed: ‘The constituents of Major Davies and Mr Haydn Jones will seriously doubt whether they are getting all the representation to which they are entitled’<sup>40</sup>. Based on the Commons voting attendance register, it was reported that during the previous year out of a possible 431 votes H. H. Jones had been present at only 143, and Davies at only 56.<sup>41</sup> In many respects David Davies set his own agenda, paying little attention to the conventions of Parliament, with which he was disillusioned. As probably the richest man in the county, if not the region, he was able to gain public affection through the various financial and material contributions he made to local society.<sup>42</sup> In July 1921 he invited 1,900 ex-servicemen to his ancestral home, Plas Dinam, as a gesture of appreciation and gratitude for the sacrifices they had made during the Great War. Although this gathering had little to do with formal politics, such an event reaffirmed Davies’ grand and paternal status within Montgomeryshire society.<sup>43</sup> In this sense he perceived himself to be above party politics.

Davies was very proud of the fact that the internal squabbling within the national party had not affected the unity of the Montgomeryshire Liberal Association. At an earlier meeting the agent, Major Jesse Williams, reported that following his tour of local party branches, activists were fully supportive of Davies’ desire to represent them as an Independent Liberal. David Davies was delighted with the response, and in February 1922 he confidently attributed their

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 20 April 1920.

<sup>40</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 15 January 1921.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*.

cohesion to the fact that he had refused to align himself with either Asquith or Lloyd George and thus had not entered into their petty bickering.<sup>44</sup> Responding to this address, the editorial of the *Montgomeryshire Express* paid the county member a glowing tribute:

‘No constituency possesses a parliamentary representative more whole-heartedly concerned politically and personally, for its general well-being, and the unreserved public acknowledgement of the fact by the most thoroughbred Conservatives in Montgomeryshire, warrants our prediction of his unopposed return.’<sup>45</sup>

The *Montgomeryshire Express*’s assertion that even the local Conservatives supported his candidacy reveals the extent to which Davies transcended partisan barriers. In practical terms he was a difficult candidate to overcome. His caution appealed to Conservatives and Liberals alike, and his image as a wealthy benefactor, coupled with his affection for traditional Liberal principles, made him a very difficult opponent to defeat.

In contrast to the picture of unity projected by the Montgomeryshire Liberals, probably the most divided association in the region was in Denbigh. Despite the Liberals’ apparently secure grip on the constituency all was not well within their ranks. In the immediate aftermath of the Great War there was little evidence of political activity.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless as the early 1920s dawned the Liberal Party entered a new phase, which was characterised by internal squabbling

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<sup>42</sup> His grandfather, David Davies, was reputedly the first millionaire in Wales. His fortune was based on his success in the coal and rail industries during the mid nineteenth century.

<sup>43</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 23 July 1921.

<sup>44</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 14 February 1922.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

and disputes – a feature that could only be regarded as beneficial to their opponents. The first of their very public spats occurred at the start of 1922. *The Denbighshire Free Press* reported that during the first meeting of the Liberal Executive Committee since December 1918, David S. Davies had announced his decision to relinquish his responsibilities as MP at the next election. Although this was greeted with disappointment in some quarters, for others his abysmal voting record and lack of presence either in the Commons or around the constituency offered an ideal opportunity to select a candidate with greater vigour and zeal.<sup>47</sup> Confirming this view, and depicting the political nature of the seat, the Welsh organiser of the Liberal Federation - A. G. Roberts – wrote thus to E. Morgan Humphries:

‘I am having a very interesting time working the old haunts, but whoever wants to snatch this seat will have to look lively – there are other forces at work even in the outlandish districts – y wlad ucha, as we call it. All sides agree that the present member will have to go.’<sup>48</sup>

Roberts’ impressions were insightful. Much tension existed within party ranks, which is best exemplified during a meeting of the executive committee in January 1922. *The Denbighshire Free Press* reported that a palpable undercurrent pervaded this meeting. Initially this was attributed to the fact that the chairman, Lord Clwyd, was pressing for David S. Davies’ successor to be a Lloyd George supporter.<sup>49</sup> However, later the same month the real reason for

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<sup>46</sup> Their activities are not recorded either in the local press or Conservative Party minutes. The minutes of the Liberal and Labour Parties have not survived. The records of the divisional Conservative Party have been deposited in Denbighshire Record Office.

<sup>47</sup> *Denbighshire Free Press*, 14 January 1922.

<sup>48</sup> A. G. Roberts to E. M. Humphries, 29 September 1920, E. M. Humphries MS, A/2935, NLW

<sup>49</sup> Lord Clwyd was formerly known as Sir J. Herbert Roberts, the constituency’s representative before 1918.

this tension emerged in an edition of the *Liverpool Post*. It was revealed that the events leading up to the election campaign of 1918 had not been as transparent as first anticipated. According to the paper there had been some irregularity regarding David S. Davies' candidacy from the outset. Following his predecessor's decision to retire he had been proclaimed the Party's new representative 'before anyone had time to think'.<sup>50</sup> In an unsigned column, 'Welsh Graduate' revealed that a secret pact had been made in 1918 between Lord Clwyd, David S. Davies and another man - Caradoc Rees. Lord Clwyd announced his retirement only on the strict undertaking that Rees be adopted as his successor, with Davies supporting his candidacy. In the meantime, though, Davies and Rees had fallen out, giving the former the justification he needed to stand for the party.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless Davies was not a popular choice with the divisional party. The *Liverpool Post* alleged that he was only allowed to stand on the undertaking he stood for one term only. This appeased his critics as the guarantee was documented, and they assumed Davies would be bound to his pledge. Only the party elite were privy to this knowledge before it was disclosed to the press. As a result many rank and file members were left in a state of bewilderment.<sup>52</sup> Although these events were not openly discussed in any subsequent meetings, invariably they exacerbated prevailing divisions and affected morale and good will. Such actions hardly created an image of dynamic and democratic organization. On the contrary, they revealed a party dominated by a small paternalistic clique, with no intention of incorporating new policy ideas.

As a direct consequence of these revelations the division's Independent Liberals were eager to distance themselves from the duplicity of the Coalitionists. In April 1922 they convened a

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<sup>50</sup> The *Liverpool Post*'s article appeared in full in the 14 January 1922 edition of the Denbighshire Free Press.

<sup>51</sup> Denbighshire Free Press, 28 January 1922.



conference to discuss the merits of adopting a candidate ‘free from Tory’ influence. Advocating this development was Thomas Waterhouse, a prominent member of the North Wales Liberal Federation and the Flintshire Association, who supported the nomination of Llewellyn G. Williams. It was claimed that he would uphold true Liberal values. Moreover, they had received assurances from a Labour source that if Williams stood for election they would not oppose his candidacy.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the two Liberals camps that were emerging in Denbigh seemingly shared little common ground

The selection of the man who was to stand against Llewellyn Williams was again shrouded in controversy. John Cledwyn Davies was the county’s incumbent director of education – and had no intention of relinquishing his post if he was elected to Parliament.<sup>54</sup> Thus, he quickly became the focus of his opponents’ frustrations. Despite his impeccable pedigree – a public servant, a lay nonconformist preacher and a Welsh speaker – allegations of corruption were rife. Leading the protestations was Edward Hughes. As an alderman and official of both the Wrexham Labour party and the NWMA, he was angered by the degree of leniency afforded to Davies by the county council.<sup>55</sup> It had been agreed that Davies would be granted leave of absence for a year if he was successful. Moreover, in the short term W. G. Dodd, chairman of the county’s education committee, would shoulder his responsibilities. Despite the fact that Dodd was an ‘experienced educationalist’, even the *Denbighshire Free Press* questioned the ethics of such an appointment, observing: ‘It would be interesting to know whether their love

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 1 April 1922.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 8 April 1922.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 29 April 1922.

for education or zeal for the Coalition was the principal inspirer of Mr. Dodd's offer.'<sup>56</sup> The main reason why so much controversy surrounded Dodd's selection was due to the fact he was the secretary of the constituency Liberal Association, and one of the most prominent Liberals in the county. Once again, then, it was perceived that a Liberal elite was assuming it could settle political matters within its own sphere by giving favours and allocating roles. As a consequence a power struggle emerged between those Liberals who were happy for these practices to continue and those who wanted change. This was not simply about ideological concerns. It was also to do with the transparency of politics and the need to 'clean up' Liberalism in the constituency. However whilst local men involved in the party's management, like J. C. Davies, continued to represent the party this could not be achieved. Thus, despite the party's domination in Denbigh, within the context of North East Wales it was in the greatest state of decay and in need of assistance. Organisational matters did not feature in the local party's deliberations between 1918 and 1922. They relied on other factors, such as cultural and familial loyalty, to ensure their passage to Westminster. They were seemingly undeterred by Britain's changing political composition and demands.

### *The 1922 General Election*

The result of the 1922 election stunned the Liberal party. It brought into sharp focus the extent to which they had declined. Their representation had shriveled substantially from their glory days during the Edwardian era. They now commanded only 115 constituencies. For Asquith and his followers this was disappointing. For Lloyd George it was a disaster.<sup>57</sup> He had truly fallen from grace. Nonetheless the party had little time to lick its wounds. Chris Cook notes:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 3 June 1922.

<sup>57</sup> C. Cook, The age of alignment: Electoral politics in Britain, 1922-1929, Bristol 1975, p.26.

‘Though Lloyd George realised the seriousness of the Liberal position, even he did not awake to the reality of the new position. To have restored Liberal fortunes, it would have needed an invigorated and active leadership in a united Liberal Party...Above all, the party would need active, eager, constituency associations, willing with missionary zeal to recoup the years in which the only propaganda that had been seen had come from Labour’.<sup>58</sup>

Active and enthusiastic constituency associations were in short supply. Cook notes that the splits and divisions that had emerged within the party nationally concealed the extent to which organisation, propaganda and political activity had collapsed at a local level.<sup>59</sup> Apathy and disillusionment led to inactivity. This was the case in counties like Sussex, which saw only 17 Liberal candidates fight a possible 39 contests between 1918 and 1924; or East Anglia where by October 1923 only 15 of 28 constituencies employed an agent.<sup>60</sup> Thus in comparison North Wales was seen as a Liberal stronghold. Yet even here efforts were waning.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p.26.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p.27.

Table 2.2

Result of 1922 Election in North East Wales

| <i>Constituency</i>    | <i>Candidate</i> | <i>Party</i> | <i>Number of votes</i> | <i>Percentage of vote</i> | <i>Majority</i> | <i>Turnout</i> |
|------------------------|------------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <i>Denbigh</i>         | J.C. Davies      | Nat. Lib     | 12975                  | 53.9                      | 16%             | 76.7%          |
|                        | Mrs. A. Brodrick | Con          | 9138                   | 37.9                      |                 |                |
|                        | Ll. G. Williams  | Lib          | 1974                   | 8.2                       |                 |                |
| <i>Flintshire</i>      | T. H. Parry      | Nat. Lib     | 16854                  | 44.2                      | 4.6%            | 79.4%          |
|                        | A. L. Jones      | Con          | 15080                  | 39.6                      | -               | -              |
|                        | D. G. Jones      | Lab          | 6163                   | 16.2                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Montgomeryshire</i> | D. Davies        | Lib          | Unopposed              | -                         | -               | -              |
| <i>Wrexham</i>         | R. Richards      | Lab          | 11940                  | 35.8                      | 3.2%            | 84.4%          |
|                        | E. R. Davies     | Nat. Lib     | 10842                  | 32.6                      | -               | -              |
|                        | R. C. Roberts    | Con          | 10508                  | 31.6                      | -               | -              |

Source: F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, Glasgow 1969.

In spite of the prevailing mood, the party managed to retain all but one of their seats in North East Wales. Nonetheless the Liberals were far from being a cohesive body in this region. The reunification of the party did not appease all members. Both Independent Liberals and the 'Wee Frees' remained dubious of Lloyd George and embittered due to his previous political manoeuvrings. This was certainly the spirit that prevailed in the Denbigh division. As the election campaign opened 'quietly' at the end of the year, two very different Liberal representatives announced their intention to contest the seat.<sup>61</sup> There is little doubt that the emergence of both J. C. Davies and Llewellyn Williams compromised the chances of an outright Liberal victory. Whilst morally and ideologically much separated these two men, for the majority of the electorate who were ignorant of their differences the appearance of two

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p.33.

men representing the same party seemed futile. Thus, in many respects the Liberal Party was fortunate to have retained the seat at all.

Unsurprisingly it was Davies who was victorious, commanding just over half of the vote. He enjoyed a successful campaign, and was supported by many of the division's leading Liberals, including J. H. Morris-Jones and Gomer Roberts. However some weeks earlier the *Denbighshire Free Press* had questioned whether he would actually stand as 'his candidature had been so severely criticised in some quarters that one would not be altogether surprised to find him withdrawing it.'<sup>62</sup> Conversely, his opponent Llewellyn Williams was referred to as 'one of the ablest of the younger set of Welsh politicians'.<sup>63</sup> Yet whilst the fight for the moral high ground of the Liberal Party dominated the campaign, the Conservatives battled on in the background. They had not been expected to attract a strong following. Indeed, at the start of the campaign the local press had speculated that the party would face an 'uphill struggle'.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless the controversy that surrounded the Liberals boosted Ann Brodrick's candidacy, an advantage even the Liberals could not afford to concede.

Other constituency Liberal associations did not suffer from the same degree of controversy or allegations of corruption. In both Wrexham and Flintshire the divisional parties were publicly united behind their respective pro-Lloyd George candidates. Their campaigns shared much in common, with free trade and social issues commanding much of their attention. Yet it was the emerging strength of their rivals that was most significant. Welcoming the disintegration of

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<sup>61</sup> *Denbighshire Free Press*, 11 November 1922.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 21 October 1922.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 21 October 1922.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 11 November 1922.

the Coalition, the *Wrexham Leader* reveled in a return to the 'straight politics' which brought about the 1922 parliamentary contest.<sup>65</sup> The departure of Sir Robert Thomas, the popular Coalition Liberal, to contest the Angelsey seat left the Liberal Party with a big void to fill. Initially it seemed that their candidate would not face Conservative opposition. However as the contest drew closer the desire of the Conservative party chairman not to split the anti-socialist vote was over ruled, thus Major R. C. Roberts was put forward.

The appearance of the Conservative candidate stifled Liberal ambitions. Corroborating Labour's assertions that little divided the Conservatives and the Liberals, Major R. C. Roberts delighted in emphasising the point that in terms of general policy both he and Evan Davies had much in common.<sup>66</sup> However in terms of performance the *Wrexham Leader* saw Robert Richards, the Labour candidate, as the front runner in this contest. Not only did he possess a 'strong personal appeal' he also proved to be a popular choice amongst a wide cross-section of the electorate.<sup>67</sup> The weaknesses of his competitors, combined with the support he received from his local party were significant factors in his eventual victory. Up until their reunion in late 1922, the hostility between the Coalition Liberals and their minority Independent counterparts had been all too apparent. The Conservatives were in a worse position. It was alleged that their strategic aims were 'impossible' to decipher. Apparently it was an 'open secret' that their Chairman, Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, was against relinquishing their ties with the Liberals.<sup>68</sup> Consequently a combination of circumstances helped Labour to make a vital breakthrough in the constituency.

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<sup>65</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 3 November 1922.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 November 1922.

In Flintshire it was the Conservatives who posed the greatest threat to the Liberal party. Although this was the constituency's first three-cornered contest, Labour stood little realistic chance of capturing the seat. According to both the *Flintshire Observer* and *County Herald* the contest was characterised by its gentility. Thomas Parry continued to emphasize his commitment to Lloyd George, for which faith he was rewarded with a fleeting visit from the Premier in Rhyl during the campaign.<sup>69</sup> Due to his failing health, Thomas Parry was unable to conduct an exhaustive campaign. In the clutch of meetings he actually attended, Welsh matters and agricultural issues dominated his agenda. Ultimately he was successful, yet the fact that he was prevented from conducting an energetic campaign should have served as a warning for the Liberal party that they could not be complacent about their standing. They could not presume that their support was guaranteed, based on their past reputation. Whilst party labels were important nothing could be taken for granted. Montgomeryshire was again uncontested. This was a situation that angered the *County Times*. It was concerned that political apathy would breed amongst the electorate if they were not afforded their right to vote.<sup>70</sup>

In the aftermath of the election little changed within the four constituency parties. There is no record of any association analysing their performance in an attempt to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their campaign. Seemingly they learnt very little from the experience. Indeed such complacency came to be a notable feature of Liberalism in this region. During these months only the Flintshire party revealed any degree of vision. By early 1923 its sub-committee was reporting back to the Executive on organisational matters. It advised that the association would be best served if it devolved its powers and divided the division into three

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<sup>69</sup> County Herald, 17 November 1922.

<sup>70</sup> Montgomeryshire County Times, 4 November 1922.

or four separate areas, each with its own responsibilities.<sup>71</sup> In Montgomeryshire the party's new agent, T. Huws Jones, urged the County Association to establish its financial independence and become less reliant on the contributions made by David Davies. Although they were financially secure, he noted that this was due to the fact that their representative made such generous donations.<sup>72</sup> Jones expressed his concern that the actual amount received from rank and file members was very low, and that this situation needed to be reversed.<sup>73</sup> Unlike their counterparts in other North Wales constituencies, the Montgomeryshire Liberals felt they could afford to be relaxed. Not only could they rely on the generosity of David Davies, but also because they had not needed to finance a campaign since 1910 little demand was placed on their coffers. In many respects the style of leadership offered by T. Huws Jones contrasted greatly with that of his predecessor, Jesse Williams. From his addresses to the party it is clear he was eager to reignite the party's political flame. His major concern was that apathy would permeate the ranks, thus making it weaker if they were to face an electoral contest. Underlining this point at the annual meeting of the Newtown Association, he said:

‘...that never had interest in politics been at a lower ebb than now, and never was it more important that people should take an intelligent interest in the questions before the country,’<sup>74</sup>

Davies' disillusionment with Parliament was well known by the end of 1923. Although he spoke passionately on issues like the League of Nations, and gained influence through his

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<sup>71</sup> Flintshire Liberal Association minutes, 17 March 1923.

<sup>72</sup> The party's annual report for 1923 illustrates this point. Of the £355/ 0/ 3 the party had amassed in their coffers that year £300 had come directly from David Davies, Montgomeryshire Liberal Party minutes, NLW.

<sup>73</sup> Montgomeryshire Express, 23 October 1923.



campaigning, the electorate would have been justified in feeling disenfranchised. Nonetheless his credentials as a generous benefactor and paternalist in the county were not in doubt. Another example of his generosity was cited after it emerged that the County Council did not have enough resources to cover the cost of desperately needed houses in Welshpool. In September 1923 the town's Labour Party had expressed concern at the prevailing standard of the housing stock. In the borough alone 37 houses had been condemned as not being fit for human habitation, whilst 62 were considered as being only 'reasonably fit'. In an attempt to partly rectify the situation Davies offered to provide the bricks for an estate of houses, on condition that the local council funded the rest of the project.<sup>75</sup> This is a good example of the way that a 'new' social issue was deflected by 'traditional' campaigning emphases. Through his actions David Davies appeased the local press who had been pressing for greater housing provision, and set a precedence for the county council which they could not ignore.<sup>76</sup> Despite such attempts to improve society, though, by the time the 1923 election was called much remained unchanged within Welsh Liberal circles. A fact which was significant and detrimental to the fate of the party.

### The 1923 Election

Stanley Baldwin's decision to go to the polls in 1923 over the issue of tariff reform brought traditional Liberal values into sharp focus. The principle of Free Trade, the central tenet of their ideology, was being directly challenged in an attempt to improve the country's economic situation. The Liberal manifesto, *A Call to the Nation*, stated:

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<sup>74</sup> Montgomeryshire County Times, 19 April 1924.

<sup>75</sup> Montgomeryshire Express, 25 September 1923.

‘Every serious observer of contemporary affairs knows that Liberal criticism of this policy during the last Parliament now dissolved was abundantly justified. Our warnings were left unheeded, and the inaction of the Government has been a potent contributory cause of unemployment at home.’<sup>78</sup>

Echoing national concerns, this was also the issue that dominated the agenda of the Liberal candidates in North East Wales. In electoral terms the three contests that were witnessed did nothing to alter the overall position of the parties. The Liberals retained Denbigh and Flintshire, Labour held Wrexham and Montgomeryshire remained unopposed.

Table 2.3

Result of 1923 Election in North East Wales

| <i>Constituency</i>    | <i>Candidate</i> | <i>Party</i> | <i>Number of votes</i> | <i>Percentage of vote</i> | <i>Majority</i> | <i>Turnout</i> |
|------------------------|------------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <i>Denbigh</i>         | E. W. Davies     | Lib          | 12164                  | 59.8                      | 19.6%           | 63.6%          |
|                        | D. Rhys          | Con          | 8186                   | 40.2                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Flintshire</i>      | T. H. Parry      | Lib          | 19609                  | 56.8                      | 13.6%           | 69.4%          |
|                        | E. H. G. Roberts | Con          | 14926                  | 43.2                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Montgomeryshire</i> | D. Davies        | Lib          | Unopposed              | -                         | -               | -              |
| <i>Wrexham</i>         | R. Richards      | Lab          | 12918                  | 39.0                      | 5.6%            | 81.1%          |
|                        | H. A. Morgan     | Lib          | 11037                  | 33.4                      | -               | -              |
|                        | E. F. Bushby     | Con          | 9131                   | 27.6                      | -               | -              |

Source: F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, Glasgow 1969.

<sup>76</sup> See Chapter 1. Montgomeryshire County Council was desperately short of money during the early 1920s and could not afford to extend their housing stock. Through his actions David Davies underlined his paternalistic inclinations.

<sup>77</sup> F. W. S. Craig, *British Election Manifestos, 1918-66*, Glasgow 1970, p.25.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet the tide was starting to turn. In Wrexham and Flintshire the Liberals' hold over their constituencies was weakening, even though Free Trade was a traditional Liberal cause which might have been expected to attract greater support. Their political opponents were eroding their position. Wrexham was particularly vulnerable. No longer could the party perceive Labour's victory as an anomaly. Robert Richards' two consecutive wins meant that Labour had established themselves as the dominant party in the constituency. Moreover the presence of the Conservatives again diluted the Liberals performance. For the time being the party retained Flintshire – despite the ailing Thomas Parry's inability to lead a campaign. Nevertheless the Conservatives were beginning to make up ground. In the absence of a Labour candidate, the Tories commanded over 43 per cent of the vote. Thus, the Liberals could ill afford to ignore the Conservative threat.

In the division of Denbigh a new candidate represented the Liberal party. Whilst J. C. Davies' decision to relinquish his parliamentary duties was greeted with dismay in some circles, in the long term this was a positive development.<sup>79</sup> Adopting a candidate from outside the constituency was the only way in which tensions within the party could be alleviated. Following Sir Ellis Griffith's refusal to stand, Ellis Davies was approached. According to A. G. Roberts this was a development Davies himself had hoped for. However it is significant that both in his professional and personal capacity Roberts was wary of this move. Both as a friend of Ellis Davies and organiser of the Welsh Liberal Federation, he believed that Davies' efforts would be unsuccessful. He wrote to E. Morgan Humphries:

'Unfortunately E. D. has been telling different people that he wouldn't mind

standing for W. Denbigh...I would do anything to advocate the candidature of E. D. if I thought he had the ghost of a chance of being nominated, but he hasn't, so please do try and disillusion him of this idea for his own sake. Even Ll. G's influence will not secure his candidature here.'<sup>80</sup>

Certainly the prospect of Ellis Davies' candidacy was not greeted with widespread enthusiasm from individuals who regarded themselves as worthy contenders for the role. J. Henry Morris-Jones, a prominent party official and leader of the Colwyn Bay Liberals, complained to Lloyd George of Davies' adoption. Replying to Morris-Jones in November 1923 the former Premier wrote:

'I know nothing of the conditions under which Ellis Davies came to be selected, but if he was chosen by the Liberal Association, one of the conditions of Liberal unity was that there should be an absolutely free choice. You will, therefore, see that I cannot possibly intervene, and I am sure the constituency would resent it if I were to do so.'<sup>81</sup>

Despite Morris-Jones' sentiments Davies' candidacy was greeted with anticipation. Even though he was deeply hostile towards Lloyd George (unlike the previous two MPs), his appearance on Denbigh's political stage was welcomed. The former Eifion MP had been refused the 'coupon' for the new seat of Caernarfon in 1918. Recalling his experiences of the 1918 Election 'and its consequences', he challenged J .C. Davies' glowing platitudes to Lloyd

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<sup>79</sup> Denbighshire Free Press, 24 November 1922.

<sup>80</sup> A. G. Roberts to E. M. Humphries, 21 October 1923, E. M. Humphries MS, A 2939. NLW.

George when he stated ‘the Election of 1918 was probably the most momentous in history. It made Mr Lloyd George dictator in Europe.’<sup>82</sup> Nonetheless it was Davies’ reputation as a respected elder statesman of the Party which made him a figure that all Liberals could admire in different ways. The presence of such an experienced and progressive candidate certainly diffused the atmosphere between the opposing factions within the party, and his emphasis on free trade and agriculture proved to be a winning formula. Despite the fact that the *Denbighshire Free Press* congratulated the Conservative, David Rhys, on a strong performance he had been unable to capture the same level of support or momentum as Davies had achieved during his campaign.<sup>83</sup>

The contests in Wrexham, Flintshire and Denbigh forced local parties to confront dilemmas such as policy strategy and campaign management, be they successful or not. In Montgomeryshire this was not the case. The weakness of the opposition parties deprived the constituency of yet another electoral contest. Both local newspapers made their frustrations known. The *Montgomeryshire County Times* argued that the lack of political competition in Montgomeryshire did not equate to ‘political harmony’. Rather it had the potential to lead to apathy and disillusionment.<sup>84</sup> Moreover the paper was angered that whilst David Davies was happy to criticise the Conservative Government, at a recent meeting of the divisional Liberal Party he admitted that his own party leader failed to offer credible alternatives to their initiatives, a sentiment that was echoed by the *Montgomeryshire Express*.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless while

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<sup>81</sup> Lloyd George to J. H. Morris-Jones, 22 November 1923, J. H. Morris-Jones MS, D/MJ/36, FRO.

<sup>82</sup> Ellis Davies – ‘The Election of 1918 and its Consequences’ (unpublished & n.d.), Ellis Davies MS, fo 36 (‘Miscellaneous Personalia’), NLW.

<sup>83</sup> *Denbighshire Free Press*, 1 December 1923.

<sup>84</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 24 November 1923.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 20 October 1923.

the local Conservatives were in disarray and party finances were at such a low ebb a senior source acknowledged that nothing could be done.<sup>86</sup> The organisation was ‘all to bits’.<sup>87</sup>

### The 1924 General Election

The implications of the Liberals’ complacency in the 1923 contest were fully realised in 1924. During the short-lived period of the first Labour Government the spirit of Liberalism in North East Wales continued to be of a lethargic nature. The ambiguous attitude of the party in London gave no lead. Ramsay MacDonald’s decision to dissolve Parliament in October 1924 forced them into action once more. For the political parties it meant the third campaign within the space of three years, whilst the potential for apathy to breed amongst the electorate was great. All four seats in North East Wales were contested and consequently the Liberals were forced to fight to retain their position. Some were more successful than others.

Table 2.4

Result of 1924 Election in North East Wales

| <i>Constituency</i>    | <i>Candidate</i> | <i>Party</i> | <i>Number of votes</i> | <i>Percentage of vote</i> | <i>Majority</i> | <i>Turnout</i> |
|------------------------|------------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <i>Denbigh</i>         | E. W. Davies     | Lib          | 12671                  | 53.0                      | 6%              | 72.5%          |
|                        | Mrs. A. Brodrick | Con          | 11250                  | 47.0                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Flintshire</i>      | E. H. G. Roberts | Con          | 19054                  | 46.4                      | 11.9%           | 80.2%          |
|                        | T. H. Parry      | Lib          | 14169                  | 34.5                      | -               | -              |
|                        | D. G. Jones      | Lab          | 7821                   | 19.1                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Montgomeryshire</i> | D. Davies        | Lib          | 14942                  | 77.3                      | 54.6%           | 79.4%          |
|                        | A. Davies        | Lab          | 4384                   | 22.7                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Wrexham</i>         | C. P. Williams   | Lib          | 19154                  | 55.6                      | 11.2%           | 82.6%          |
|                        | R. Richards      | Lab          | 15291                  | 44.4                      | -               | -              |

Source: F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, Glasgow 1969.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid, 24 November 1923.

<sup>87</sup> Montgomeryshire Express, 20 November 1923.

In Wrexham the Liberals enjoyed a rare advantage going into the 1924 contest. The Conservatives had withdrawn from the fight in their favour. Thus C. P. Williams was assured a far stronger share of the anti-socialist vote. This was enough to unseat the Labour incumbent, Robert Richards. Indeed Williams secured a 11.2 per cent majority – a tribute to both his energetic campaign and the sacrifice of the Conservative candidate. The party suffered a set-back in Flintshire. The Conservative, Goodman Roberts, overtook Thomas Parry in the polls. In part this victory could be attributed to several factors: the revived and invigorated strength of Conservatism, demographic changes and the personal appeal of Roberts. Yet all pointed to the fact that the party needed to adopt a more adaptable and practical approach to local and national politics. In a sense this was the ‘wake up’ call needed to motivate Liberal associations of neighbouring constituencies. Indeed even in the ‘secure’ seat of Denbigh the margin of victory enjoyed by Ellis Davies was exceedingly tight. A majority of only 6 per cent was not a satisfactory result for the party. The polarisation of politics at national level made it especially necessary for the party to develop an independent appeal in order to survive. However, David Davies made light work of his opponent. His comfortable win reflected his personal following, and the extent to which Liberalism was an intrinsic part of society’s cultural make-up.

### Conclusion

By the end of 1924 all four divisional Liberal associations had been forced to re-evaluate their position and popularity. They were in a very different position to the one they occupied in 1918. The 1924 General Election served as an important warning. They could not assume

support; rather it had to be earned. Liberals throughout the country were starting to become aware of their tenuous position. Summing up their defeat in 1924, R. J. Thomas the MP for Anglesey and former Wrexham representative wrote to Haydn Jones, the MP for Merioneth:

‘Yes! The rout of the Liberal Party is complete, and it will take years to recover.

We little band of Liberals will be lost in the next House, and as far as I can see

we might as well stay home!’<sup>88</sup>

The widening of the franchise, the establishment of new communities involving individuals from other parts of Britain, and the changes in occupational patterns contributed to the erosion of ‘traditional’ Liberal strongholds. The party had to adapt to change.

In Flintshire and Montgomeryshire, for different reasons, the party’s candidates failed to inspire party activists. Nor did they exude an air of enthusiasm. On the contrary, they affected morale and encouraged an air of apathy and arrogance to be fostered. Inactivity, a lack of organisation, and the emergence of Labour eroded the Liberal hold over Wrexham. Most damaging of all, though, was the hostile atmosphere that pervaded the Denbigh Party. Resentment and recriminations were far more prevalent internally than they ever were directed towards their opponents. The period between 1918 and 1924 should have forced all parties to change their ways. Yet whilst some associations were successful in doing so, the majority did nothing. The guidance received from the party’s Abingdon Street headquarters was minimal, a situation which contrasted greatly with the assistance given to their rivals. By this time national organisation and national politics had a large bearing on constituency parties and



politics. To be at the cutting edge of politics they needed expert help. To develop a positive image they needed positive literature. When that was not forthcoming they had to rely on their own initiatives.

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<sup>88</sup> R. J. Thomas to H. H. Jones, 3 November 1924, H. H. Jones MS, fo 606, NLW.

## *Chapter 3*

### *The challenge to the Liberal hegemony, 1918-1924*

Whilst at the national level the Labour and the Conservatives parties dominated the political arena during the inter-war years, regionally the Liberal Party still managed to retain some strongholds. Here old traditions died hard. As a consequence opposing parties were forced to position themselves around the Liberals if they were to extend their appeal and achieve a vital breakthrough. Between 1918 and 1924 both the Labour and Conservative parties vied to erode the Liberals stranglehold over North East Wales. Yet whilst they were united in their aim, they were diverse in their strategy. The nature and activism of Liberalism varied from constituency to constituency. Thus, opposing parties were forced to adopt differing approaches if they were to be successful. To a large extent their manoeuvrings were dictated by the ideological position occupied by the particular divisional Liberal association – whether they were ‘progressive’ or ‘traditional’ in their outlook. Success tended to go to the party which built the strongest opposition to the Liberals.

Prior to the outbreak of war the fortunes of these two parties had varied considerably. The Conservatives had long established roots in the region, and had enjoyed a strong political presence in North Wales for much of the nineteenth century. Although their representatives rarely reflected the cultural, linguistic or religious traditions of the people, their dominance went largely unabated until 1885. Nonetheless, taking advantage of the widened franchise during the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Liberals eventually challenged and replaced them. Yet the Conservatives were by no means a spent force. In addition to

retaining their core support amongst the wealthy, they attracted more working and middle class voters. In terms of management and organisation, they were the most successful political party in North East Wales between 1918 and 1939. Although this was not reflected in electoral terms, when the obstacles the Tories had to overcome are considered, their achievements were substantial. By the late 1930s they were a powerful force, developing the strength that eventually produced a well-organised machine, leading to some electoral success after 1945. The Tories had to cultivate and appeal to new supporters; they could ill afford complacency. Indeed the activities of both the Flintshire and Denbigh parties after 1921 illustrates their desire to expand and grow.

Labour's growth in North East Wales was slow in comparison. The party failed to make a lasting impression in the region's rural areas and encountered difficulties penetrating the economically and socially diverse seat of Flintshire. Only in the predominantly mining constituency of Wrexham did Labour lay down any solid foundations in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, and even here success was not immediate or complete. The party's popularity had been gradually growing in this division from the first decade of the twentieth century. However it is fair to say that before 1914 even the most ardent Labour supporters would not have predicted the degree of success they were to enjoy during the ensuing decades. In 1914 the two main focuses of the party's political activity was the area ILP branch and the Wrexham and Districts Trades Council. Neither had a significant following at this time. Despite the fact that Wrexham was one of the first four areas in Wales (and the only one in the North) to see a branch of the ILP established in 1897, low membership characterized its early history. Unlike the mining communities of South Wales, Wrexham was not a socialist hotbed. In many respects a strong Liberal culture continued to thrive in many of the districts. Welsh culture and Nonconformity continued to

occupy a central role in mining towns like Rhos. Thus the influence of the NWMA and the Labour party was diluted – they were unable to permeate society with their values in the same way that the SWMF managed in areas like the Rhondda.<sup>1</sup> In North Wales the party had to compete with other radical impulses.

The Wrexham Trades and District Council had already made their political aspirations known prior to the 1918 election. Their foray into the political world was welcomed by both their members and the local trade unions. However the transition was not a smooth one. Like many other constituency parties, financial considerations frequently influenced decisions and curtailed ambitions. This point is graphically illustrated when the selection of their first candidate is considered. A prominent ILP activist from Rhos, J. W. Williams, was severely handicapped in his campaign to stand as Labour's representative following his union's refusal to guarantee his campaign expenses. Despite his suitability, the deliberations of the Trades Council reveals that finance dictated and motivated many in their decisions not to support his candidature.<sup>2</sup> Thus, unsurprisingly, Wrexham's first Labour candidate in April 1918, W. B. Steer, was fully sponsored by the National Union of Teachers.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, by the time the 'coupon' election had been called the situation in Wrexham had changed. Steer departed the area a month following his adoption, opting to stand for the constituency of Dudley instead. Two very different men subsequently vied for Wrexham's candidacy. Neither had any financial concerns. E. T. John was a wealthy businessman. As financial secretary of the NWMA, Hugh Hughes had the backing and support of his union. They represented two contrasting Labour traditions. As the sitting

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<sup>1</sup> C. Williams, Democratic Rhondda, Cardiff 1996.

Liberal MP for Denbigh East, John's progressive credentials were not in doubt. Although a member of the Liberal party he was considered a political maverick and embodied the spirit of the Lib-Lab tradition, even though he was an employer. He had been one of the four Liberal MPs to vote against the Conscription Bill in 1916, and was a passionate supporter of Welsh Home Rule. Yet the Trades Council were unconvinced of his commitment to Labour. Despite the fact that he offered the party a 'respectable' guise and had the potential to attract Liberal voters, they were reluctant to even interview him:

'...Mr E.T.John is not a member of the local Labour Party, and is not prepared to pledge himself to accept decisions (if unfavourable to himself) of the local Labour Party. We fail to see that any useful purpose would be served by inviting Mr John to address this meeting'<sup>4</sup>

Conversely, Hughes' candidacy was seen as a more viable option. Here was a man that Labour's core supporters in the division, the miners, could accept. Although never stated in the party minutes, the consolidation and establishment of strong foundations within the mining community was seen as the key to the party's success. Indeed, in order to cultivate this support a separate Labour official was appointed to serve alongside the political agent, J. T. Edwards, dealing specifically with the concerns of miners.<sup>5</sup> Yet the impassioned campaign led by Hughes, with his emphasis on key Labour policies like nationalisation, could not overturn the patriotic appeal of R. J. Thomas. Thomas enjoyed several advantages over his opponent, the most significant being the Conservative support that had been bestowed upon him. Moreover he appealed to a wider cultural spectrum. He made a

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<sup>2</sup> Wrexham Trades Council and Divisional Labour Party minutes, 19 March 1918, DRO.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 3 August 1918.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 8 October 1918.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 5 November 1918.

point of addressing election meetings in both Welsh and English, and highlighted issues which had a particular resonance with the people of Wrexham, stressing the need for a free education system, improved housing conditions and the sanctity of free trade.

Despite the fact that this election was unique in terms of the political climate and the emergence of a new party, press reports implied that in general Wrexham's electorate were apathetic about the contest. *The North Wales Guardian* conceded that 'very little enthusiasm' had been displayed at grassroots level. Turnout failed to exceed 70 per cent of the vote, even though for many this would have marked their first opportunity to vote in a parliamentary election. Moreover, Labour failed to secure the support of their target group - the miners. The coal mining industry constituted 40 per cent of the industry of Wrexham, yet Labour attracted only 23 per cent of the vote. It could not automatically assume their loyalty.<sup>6</sup> Although Wrexham did have relatively high trade union membership rates, Labour's failure to win a higher proportion of the vote challenges theories that the party's rise can be attributed to class-consciousness alone.

Nevertheless the Wrexham party did show some promise for the future, unlike their position in the Denbigh seat. This ostensibly agricultural constituency possessed a conservative nature and boasted a strong Liberal parliamentary tradition. It was here that E. T. John was eventually adopted as Labour candidate in November 1918. Following the retirement of Lord Clwyd and the acrimonious divisions which pervaded the Liberal party, John felt he had a good chance of victory against the newcomer, Sir David. S. Davies. He received favourable newspaper coverage, with *The Denbighshire Free Press* acknowledging his personal, if not political, suitability. Yet rarely were elections decided

on a candidate's personal attributes alone. His choice of party 'label' proved to be detrimental.

The policies he espoused deviated little from his Liberal values. Indeed, he stood for what many Liberals saw as worthy causes: Welsh Nationalism, the 'development and prosperity of agriculture' and the 'well being' of workers of 'every class'.<sup>7</sup> However his progressive, as opposed to doctrinaire stance, was not enough to convince the electorate. Whilst he gave Labour a middle class respectability, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution the party was still an unknown quantity and a daunting prospect for many. On the other hand, Sir David S. Davies' personal profile was not as high as John's in Denbigh society. Nonetheless, his willingness to support the Coalition ensured his comfortable passage to Westminster. Thus, the 1918 election highlighted the growing importance of national issues. E. T. John's failure in this contest illustrates that local factors were becoming less significant – a misapprehension John shared with many Liberals at the time.

#### *The rebirth and regeneration of Labour and the Conservatives, 1918-22*

The projection of a strong, patriotic, image was something that preoccupied the Conservatives. All Conservative candidates in North East Wales had withdrawn in favour of their Liberal counterparts in 1918. This was a gamble that paid off. They took the opportunity to review their standing and try to improve their organisation. Essentially the party had little to lose. It was the Liberals, not themselves, who were the incumbent party. What could have been their 'wilderness' years turned into a mostly productive and fruitful period. Despite the Conservatives' ineffective organisation before 1918, their fortunes steadily improved during the Coalition years. New life was breathed into most of the

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<sup>6</sup> This figure (39.2%) is based on the percentage of miners working in the districts of Llangollen (Urban and

divisional associations, apart from the Montgomeryshire party whose recovery would have to wait until the mid 1920s. The Flintshire party, in particular, was determined to strengthen its position. Senior party figures were desperate to overcome the problems they had faced during the last election they contested in December 1910. Referring to their performance in the county's borough seat (where their support was strongest) their secretary, H. A. Tilby, reflected in 1910:

‘The leaders in the localities – with some exceptions – are much too apathetic, and leave the working of the campaign to the rank and file. This is most disastrous for experience shows that the rank and file generally will not attempt to carry on the necessary work except under the direction and with the assistance of their natural leaders.’<sup>8</sup>

Like Labour, the party needed to expand their base of support. According to their own statistics, compiled following the election, they were most popular in the rural districts of Flintshire Boroughs, such as Overton, St. Asaph and Caerwys. Considering that this was a two cornered contest their success was minimal in the industrial (and predominately mining) districts of Mold, Holywell, Greenfield and Bagillt. Table 3.1 illustrates the position:

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Rural), Wrexham (Urban and Rural), Chirk and Llansilin in 1921.



Table 3.1

*Distribution of Conservative support in Flintshire Boroughs, December 1910*

| <i>District</i>   | <i>Percentage of Conservative vote</i> | <i>Turnout</i> |
|-------------------|--|----------------|
| <i>Overton</i>    | 74.4                                   | 92             |
| <i>St. Asaph</i>  | 62.8                                   | 88.3           |
| <i>Caerwys</i>    | 55.6                                   | 94.7           |
| <i>Caergwrle</i>  | 50.6                                   | 92             |
| <i>Flint</i>      | 41.8                                   | 91.9           |
| <i>Rhuddlan</i>   | 39.1                                   | 95.4           |
| <i>Mold</i>       | 38.2                                   | 92.6           |
| <i>Holywell</i>   | 37.3                                   | 87.5           |
| <i>Greenfield</i> | 37.1                                   | 86.2           |
| <i>Bagillt</i>    | 27.2                                   | 89.1           |

Source: Flintshire Conservative Association minutes, December 1910, D/DM/307 1, FRO.

After 1918 the relationship between the Flintshire Conservatives and the division's Liberal association was strained. However in the long term this was of great benefit to the Tories, even though the situation was not of their choosing. The relationship between the Tories and Liberals in North East Wales did not mirror the political marriage of the national parties. From the outset the Flintshire Liberals made their hostility towards the Party known. Many of its most influential figures, like Henry Gladstone and Thomas Waterhouse, were opposed to the Coalition and had been angered that a pro-Lloyd George candidate, Thomas Parry, had been ushered in by Herbert Lewis.<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, Conservative attempts to form an alliance with the Liberals in January 1922 for the forthcoming county council elections were emphatically rejected.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless Conservative minutes reveal that the reluctance of the Liberals to co-operate with them actually encouraged them to make greater provision for their own future. The dichotomy between their relationship with the parliamentary representative and the local Liberal association was all too apparent, especially on the occasions when Thomas Parry

<sup>7</sup> *Denbighshire Free Press*, 7 December 1918.

<sup>8</sup> Flintshire Conservative Association, December 1910 (n.d.), D/DM/307/1, FRO.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Gladstone to Herbert Gladstone, 30 August 1919. Glynne-Gladstone MS, D/GG 964, FRO.

<sup>10</sup> Flintshire Conservative Association Minutes, 7 January 1922, FRO, D/DM/307/2.

attended Tory meetings. Even as late as March 1922 a deputation from the Conservative Executive were satisfied that Parry was committed to the Coalitionist cause.<sup>11</sup> However, the party understood that their forced alliance did not have a secure future – a sentiment that was shared by Central Office. Thus the period between 1918 and 1922 heralded a time of great change for constituency Tory parties nationwide. From 1921 onwards divisional associations were encouraged to consider their flagging position and revive support. Whilst it was not unusual for any party to follow such a course, in contrast to the Liberals the Conservatives were given considerable central assistance. Such matters dominated the agenda of the North Wales Conservative Party's annual general meeting in November 1919, where the President, Lord Mostyn, praised the dedication of activists.<sup>12</sup> The aim of this drive was to ensure that all constituency parties would eventually become financially self-sufficient, and as a consequence become a 'live' organisations. This was achieved in Denbigh, Wrexham and Flintshire during the early 1920s, where a variety of different committees were established to discuss organisational, financial and social affairs.

At the national level the Liberal Party was all too aware of the preparations made by the Tories in the event of the collapse of the Coalition. Sir William Edge expressed his grave concerns regarding both opposing parties in a report to Lloyd George in 1922:

'This is fundamental. There is no doubt that up to the present in the matter of propaganda since the accession of the new electorate we have been hopelessly beaten – first by the Labour party, and recently by the Conservatives as well.'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, D/DM 307/2.

<sup>12</sup> *Flintshire Observer*, 27 November 1919.

<sup>13</sup> Sir W. Edge, 'General Principles of Organisation', Lloyd George MS, G 6 10 3, (nd) c1922, HLRO.

In North East Wales the withdrawal of Tory candidates in 1918 provided the party with an opportunity to re-group and, significantly, consolidate party funds. Yet their situation was precarious as it would appear that the most successful Conservative associations after October 1922 were the ones who distanced themselves the most from the Liberals. Thus, in Denbigh and Flintshire the divisional parties enjoyed a considerable degree of success. In Wrexham, by contrast, the willingness of the association to co-operate with the Liberals proved to be detrimental.

As a young party Labour did not have the solid and trusted reputation enjoyed by the Conservatives. Moreover, during the war years the Wrexham Labour party's development was slow and inconsistent. However the pace of change accelerated following the announcement of the 1918 election. A concerted effort was made to organise ranks and create a coherent structure. By 1919 the divisional party had thirty branches and represented nearly one hundred per cent of organised labour in the area.<sup>14</sup> Much of the improvement was due to the dedicated work of a handful of committed activists, guided by J.T.Edwards, who had established separate committees to consider finance, organisational matters and propaganda by the end of 1918. Despite the defeat of their first parliamentary candidate, activists recognized the strong position they occupied in the constituency. Essentially they were privy to a combination of fortuitous circumstances that did not befall the other Labour parties in North East Wales. The most influential was the strength of union support. The NWMA's affiliation with Labour was of particular importance. As mining constituted the largest occupational category it is significant that the majority of mine workers were members of this union. Furthermore prominent NWMA officials occupied powerful positions on the executive committee of the divisional Labour party.

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Eatwell, *op. cit.*

Edward Hughes and Hugh Hughes are good examples of such individuals. During the early 1920s the fortunes of the coal industry in North East Wales were mixed. Whilst it dominated the Wrexham area, in Flintshire the decline of mining meant that the same sense of community and camaraderie was not fostered. Correspondingly Labour was slow to establish its foundations here.

The industrial diversity of Flintshire meant that the union's influence was also diluted to a large extent. By the turn of the twentieth century the Flintshire coalfield was concentrated into a small area between Flint and Prestatyn. Geographically separate from the collieries of Denbighshire, technologically backward and heavily faulted, the future was bleak.<sup>15</sup> Indeed Keith Gildart highlights the fact that by the 1920s the children of existing miners in the county were not looking to follow in their footsteps, but were seeking alternative sources of employment.<sup>16</sup> Reflecting these depressing prospects, membership rates of the NWMA were low. Flintshire lacked a metropolitan centre where miners could congregate. Whilst the towns of Mold, Holywell and Flint were important commercial centres they were not mining towns.

Conversely Wrexham was very much the focus for the local industry's cultural amenities. Moreover, in small towns like Rhosllannerchrugog, where the industry dominated the community, socialist ideas and values found an ideal breeding ground. The fact that unionism was more popular in the Wrexham area does not imply that membership was universal.<sup>17</sup> One of the greatest problems, which faced successive general secretaries during the first half of the century, was non-unionism. This was a theme that was reflected in many newspaper articles and union reports during the period. This was especially the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.66.

case after 1921 when the industry was decontrolled and the collieries returned to private ownership, making the position of the miner even more vulnerable.

The NWMA affiliated with the Labour party in 1912. Yet despite the close relationship between the union and Labour, the support of NWMA members to the party could not be guaranteed even when encouraged by their leaders. Underlining this expectation Edward Hughes wrote in the union's 1918 annual report: 'Every member of this Association is honour bound to support the Labour Party; but have we done so during the last election?'<sup>18</sup> The result of the 1918 coupon election disappointed Hughes. Nonetheless he was determined for the party to taste parliamentary success. In the union's 1922 annual report similar sentiments were conveyed:

'If every working man and woman did their duty at the Ballot Box, this old country of ours would become a new country where justice, comfort and happiness would prevail instead of the present great inhuman order of society.'<sup>19</sup>

Although Edward Hughes was convinced of the virtues of unionism and the Labour Party, it would appear that there existed a gulf between the beliefs of committed and articulate socialists who had attained prominent roles within the local labour movement and the 'ordinary' members. Radicalism was not a feature of the North Wales coalfield. Indeed, Keith Gildart draws parallels between this region and the colliery districts of Cumberland,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.66.

<sup>17</sup> See appendix I for membership figures of the NWMA, 1918-1939.

<sup>18</sup> Annual Report of the NWMA 1918, D/NM 75, FRO.

<sup>19</sup> Annual Report of the NWMA 1922, D/NM/79, FRO.

Forest of Dean and Leicestershire.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless the amalgamation of the ILP with the divisional Labour Party in 1921 heralded a significant turning point in the development of both organisations. They could now consolidate their strengths. Although dual membership of the two organisations was common, the ILP had played an important role in the promotion of the labour movements' ideological values. A nucleus of dedicated activists, such as Cyril O. Jones, W. Barnett and E. J. Williams, had worked hard to cultivate links with the local community. According to Roger Eatwell not only had they been instrumental around 1913 in fanning the flames of socialism amongst the miners, in addition they had also convinced some local ministers of its virtues, thus attempting to weaken the Liberals' grip on local nonconformity.<sup>21</sup>

Whilst unionism provided Labour with an opportunity to permeate the working classes, favourable press coverage in the *Wrexham Leader* afforded them the chance to convey their ideals to an even wider audience. Despite the fact that they were savaged in some local papers [such as the *Wrexham and North Wales Guardian* and the *Wrexham Advertiser*] and branded as dangerous extremists, during the early 1920s they were given a right of reply. From January 1920 until the end of December 1921 a column appeared in the *Wrexham Leader*, written by party members and featuring their political views. It provided Labour with a valuable forum, and reveals much about the mentality of the divisional party and its views on local politics.

Over the two years that the 'Standpoint of Labour' columns ran, no one occupational or social group was especially targeted. Rather, the articles were predominantly issue-led and intended for all progressively minded readers. The emphasis and content tended to rest on

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<sup>20</sup> Keith Gildart, op. cit, p.64.

a very practical form of socialism, although often their views would be justified using a doctrinal argument to legitimise opinions. Moreover it was Cyril O. Jones, a prominent member of the ILP and the NWMA's official solicitor, who provided the vital link between the divisional party and the paper. It was through him that local trade union officials were encouraged to communicate important developments.<sup>22</sup>

The recurring themes of these columns reveal much about the party's self- image, through outlining the areas in which they sought public recognition. One of their most notable aims was to underline Labour's credentials as a party capable of responsible leadership, and one which best represented the community's interests and needs. They were eager to erode the Liberals' reputation; thus they attempted to depict them as a regressive, conservative, force. Furthermore, the integrity and sincerity of the local Liberal party and its elected representatives was frequently questioned, particularly where social issues were discussed. The lack of adequate housing provision in the division was a favourite topic, echoing the campaign of local newspapers which were eager to highlight this problem. In January 1920 the contradictions shown by members of the Coalition dominated Wrexham rural district council were highlighted:

'The housing problem seems to be as far from solution as ever. Local authorities composed, to a great extent, of members who are the owners of small house property, are not merely apathetic but are even antagonistic to any real measure of reform. This Government of War Millionaires does not lag far behind in insincerity of purpose as any fair examination of the Housing Act will establish.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Roger Eatwell, *op. cit.*, p.5.

<sup>22</sup> Wrexham Trades Council & Divisional Party Minutes. Meeting of the Executive Committee, 24 August 1920.

<sup>23</sup> 'The Standpoint of Labour, Wrexham Leader, 31 January, 1920.

Referring in particular to a proposed housing scheme in Llay, Labour launched a thinly veiled personal attack on E. A. Cross (the divisional Coalition organiser) and his wife. Using emotive language, the author accused Cross and his supporters of double standards:

‘...some people think that any kind of a shack is good enough for the working classes. It is high time for the workers to say that their accommodation must be as good as that enjoyed by their exploiters.’<sup>24</sup>

To what extent the columns were able to successfully undermine the Liberals as the party of the ‘workers’ is impossible to gauge. Nonetheless Labour’s concerns about the housing crisis was both justified and sincere. This was one of the few ‘social’ problems that was frequently raised at party meetings. Following the ‘Geddes Axe’ of the early 1920s, the Wrexham Labour Party used the cutbacks that were implemented to demonstrate the extent to which the capitalist system was flawed and corrupt. As a means of justifying their claims, anecdotal evidence was used. The case of the war widow thrown out of her home because she could not afford the increased rent her landlord demanded<sup>25</sup>, or the family living in ‘lodgings’ without prospect of having their own home, were cited. They underlined the human need for more housing and the problems of a free market economy. Inspired by the ideological rhetoric of the ILP, one writer stated.<sup>26</sup>

‘That good old economic law of allowing the demand to grow to such an extent that those who supply can dictate the prices may be as true today as it was in the time of Adam Smith.’<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 24 April, 1920

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 29 May, 1920.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



The virtues of trade unionism were also highlighted in these columns. They explained the necessity of having a powerful organisation which could only be achieved through strength of numbers. The advantages for all workers, particularly agricultural labourers, were outlined:

‘The day of the narrow and selfish craft union has passed and the day of industrial unionism is dawning. The craftsmen and the skilled worker must realise more his duty to protect the most unprotected and the least skilled of his fellow workers. We want more and more unity and fewer unions. Amalgamation must be a watchword. The present competition between certain unions for the membership of the agricultural labourer is a source of serious weakness to that body of men and sooner this foolish competition and jealousy comes to an end the better it will be for all those concerned.’<sup>28</sup>

Whilst this was an attempt to extend the appeal of the Labour movement to a wider audience, the columns also provided the NWMA with a platform to discuss matters such as nationalisation. Moreover it was also a means of reviewing the performance of the local MP and attempting to justify why the Liberals were out of touch.<sup>29</sup> Significantly, though, until 1921 Labour’s parliamentary candidate, Hugh Hughes, rarely featured in the columns. However following the selection of Robert Richards the situation changed.

Although some commentators have noted that Richards was not a man of great charisma, his background and chosen career path made him an irresistible choice for Wrexham

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 17 January, 1920.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 17 July, 1920. The Party was angered by Sir Robert Thomas’ support for the second reading of the Miners’ Bill. His limited knowledge and understanding of mining matters is implicate.

Labour.<sup>30</sup> His appeal was wide reaching, and his credentials alone would have made him an ideal candidate for the Liberal Party, let alone Labour! An educated man, he rose to become professor of economics at UCNW, and had frequently visited Wrexham, prior to his adoption, to teach at the University's extension classes. Thus, many of his students, middle and working class alike, were already familiar with him. He was a Welsh Nonconformist who had enjoyed a rural upbringing in Montgomeryshire. Indeed he retained a deep interest in agricultural affairs throughout his life.<sup>31</sup> The fact that he had no union ties strengthened his appeal; in a sense he personified the 'respectable', intellectual and cultural dimensions of the Party, and significantly increased the scope of Labour's appeal to new potential voters.

The relative success enjoyed by the Wrexham Labour party during its early years was not repeated in the other constituencies of North East Wales. In Montgomeryshire the embryonic party was initially treated with great hostility by the local press. Yet far from being a force to fear, in reality the minutes of the NWLC reveal the extent to which the Labour party was resigned to failure in the seat. At a grassroots level the situation in Montgomeryshire was not quite as bleak as the regional Labour Council perceived. Reports in the local press show that there was a thriving Labour branch in Newtown, although their success elsewhere was minimal. In comparison to other divisions in North Wales very little effort was made to encourage the growth of the party, and communication between the NWLC and the divisional association was negligible. In 1923 it was revealed that the North Wales Labour Council's working party had not received any news of their

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<sup>30</sup> These are the views of Lord Emlyn Hooson and Dr. Glyn Tegai Hughes who were personally acquainted with Robert Richards. Interview recorded 24 April, 2001.

<sup>31</sup> His interest in agricultural matters is strongly reflected in his papers, housed at the NLW.

progress.<sup>32</sup> It may be presumed that the Council were doubtful of the party's ability to build an electoral base in the constituency given its agricultural composition. Although the following observation relates to Denbigh, it is also appropriate when considering Montgomeryshire:

'Eu prif anhawster oedd y ffaith mai amaethyddol yw'r rhan helathaf o'r etholaeth, ac o ganlyniad nad oedd ond ychydig o nerth Undebau Llafur y tu ôl.'<sup>33</sup>

The press coverage received by the Montgomeryshire Labour party in the immediate aftermath of the Great War was both hostile and inflammatory in its nature. Even the county's most progressive newspaper, the *Montgomeryshire Express*, fuelled suspicions. In 1918 it referred to the local party conference, depicting the delegates as 'wild men', and it reported 'the bitterness of the bad old days has evidently eaten deep into their souls, and they want to smash capitalists, they want revolution and destruction.'<sup>34</sup> Moreover the following week the *Express* emotively described Labour supporters as 'irresponsible fanatics' and the 'self-confessed disciples of Bolshevism'.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, the paper was both ignorant and dubious of the party's motives. In December 1918 an editorial piece opened with the warning 'hands off the farmers', referring to local trade unionists. It was the *Express*' assertion that they sought the support of farmers and agricultural workers in order to manipulate their views, and upset the *status quo*.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> North Wales Labour Council Minutes, 29 September 1923, H. T. Edwards MS, file C1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* Although there are errors in the original, this could be translated as: 'Their main difficulty lies in the fact that the majority of the constituency is agricultural, and as a result there is only a little Trade Union might'.

<sup>34</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 19 November 1918.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 November 1918.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 December 1918.

Nonetheless, the party's profile did gradually improve as the press began to appreciate their desire for social reform. The *Montgomeryshire Express* was passionate about social issues, and had long been angered by the apathy of local Liberal officials towards the many hardships faced by county folk. The poor state of Montgomeryshire's housing stock had featured regularly in the newspaper during 1919.<sup>37</sup> The paper was shocked by the 'scandalous unwillingness' of health officials to 'exploit the state-aided housing reform scheme'; they attributed this to the 'rural mentality' of councillors. A columnist wrote:

'Unfortunately, in our rural districts, these health authorities are almost wholly composed of farmers, to whom a huge, reeking dung hill is the finest conceivable monument that could be erected within smelling distance of their doorstep. Their traditional dislike of progress, whether in relation to education, public health, or even the development of their own industry, accounts for many of the primitive features of Welsh life, and nothing short of Government coercion will break their encrusted antagonism towards innovations which impose upon them the burden of thinking and planning.'<sup>38</sup>

Developing this point, the writer argued that such extreme circumstances had the potential to foster a political climate conducive to the growth of the Labour Party, and the 'wild extravagances of socialist visionaries and the unbridled anarchy of Bolshevism'. In essence this served as a warning to Liberals to re-evaluate the problems facing their local communities, and address the needs of the poor before their political influence declined and their party's position was compromised.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See chapter 1 for an insight into the findings of the Anti-Tuberculosis Committee Report (1939). The Commission examined in-depth the condition and standards of housing in all Welsh counties.

<sup>38</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 4 February 1919.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

A little more than a month after these fears were conveyed, the same newspaper reported that following the election of two Labour representatives to the County Council a 'public awakening' of the social problems facing the county's local communities had occurred. In a complete turnaround, praise was heaped on the work of the Rev. Gwilym Rees and the Rev. T. D. James as it was alleged they had started a process of:

'...sensitising and energising public life, breaking down electoral indifference and detachment, awakening a deadened social conscience to the recognition of communal deterioration, making the public service attractive to capable men who have been too long browsing in their tents, by the presentation of problems that excite enthusiasm for solutions, and open up a new vista for sterling stewardship in the cause of the common wheel'.<sup>40</sup>

What this piece illustrates is the gradual realisation of the merits of a practical socialism, and an acknowledgement that a distinction could be drawn between the moderate and extreme elements of Labour. The fact that both men were nonconformist ministers is also significant. They embodied the cultural elements of Labour, whilst their desire to improve conditions for the poor had impressed a paper that has long been calling for action within Liberal ranks without much success. The following year the *Montgomeryshire Express* again commended Labour for the genuine interest they were showing in social reform. In March 1920 the party had convened a conference in Newtown to discuss the implications of the 1918 Education Act. Whilst little of a political nature was discussed, what is significant is the lack of similar discussions within Liberal ranks.<sup>41</sup> It would appear that the

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<sup>40</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 25 March 1919.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 2 March 1920.

divisional Liberal party was too preoccupied with scrutinizing any faults made by the Government to have time to actually discuss specific policies.

A similar degree of pragmatism was employed in Flintshire. The *Flintshire Observer* noted that since the end of the Great War many local Labour associations had been formed within the division.<sup>42</sup> By the early 1920s a new candidate had been adopted, Frederick Llewellyn Jones, a Welsh speaking solicitor whose personal profile and approach was used to extend the party's appeal beyond the 'traditional' working class communities. Although the *Flintshire Observer* believed his candidacy was a 'set back' for extreme socialists who favoured 'direct action', this former Liberal candidate for Preston presented a moderate and pragmatic front for the party.<sup>43</sup> The fact that his brother, Cyril O. Jones, was a prominent member of the Wrexham ILP reinforces the impression that Labour was being led towards a more moderate, articulate and 'respectable' stance by a small group of activists.

A few months later, though, Jones' position became untenable. Despite supporting many of Labour's policy initiatives, he was uncomfortable with the determined and aggressive stance adopted by the MFGB and the TUC on industrial matters.<sup>44</sup> Essentially Fred Llewellyn Jones never fitted the conventional mould of a Labour candidate. Rather he was simply a disillusioned Liberal – something he readily acknowledged. Nonetheless, the fact that Flintshire party adopted such a candidate reveals the image they wanted to project. This was a man who symbolized the intellectual face of the party. Furthermore, his successors bore many similarities to his style. Thus the party were seeking a candidate who could develop a broad appeal in this culturally and occupationally diverse seat.

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<sup>42</sup> *Flintshire Observer*, 27 November 1919.

The period between 1918 and 1922 was vital in the evolution of the Labour party. In Wrexham and Flintshire divisional associations established themselves on a stronger footing. Attempts to penetrate the ranks of local government illustrated their eagerness to improve the lives of the people. The county council elections of 1919 provided an opportunity to underline their commitment. As has already been mentioned, two Labour representatives were elected in Montgomeryshire. However, surprisingly, it was in Flintshire that Labour enjoyed the greatest degree of success. Table 1.13 highlights their success in 1919 [chapter 1]. The party gained twelve seats, eroding both the Liberal and Tory stranglehold over the council. Already Labour had made a decisive impact on the political landscape of these two constituencies. Although progress was gradual their persistence was eventually rewarded.

#### *Consolidation and growth, 1922 – 1924*

The election of 1922 brought an end to the domination of the Coalition government. Both the Conservatives and Labour emphasised the hollowness of Lloyd George's pledge to create a land 'fit for heroes'. Social issues and economic policy dominated national politics. Moreover the outcome of this contest confirmed the country's changing political order. The Conservatives sauntered to an easy victory, led by the ailing Bonar Law. Labour also proved that it too was a serious contender for government after capturing 142 seats. Nonetheless, their national success was not reflected to the same extent in North East Wales. The Conservatives' performance here during the early 1920s was mixed.

The three elections held on consecutive years tested the resolve and resources of all parties. However national trends were far from reflected in this region. The breakdown of the

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid, 19 February 1920.

Coalition in October 1922 caught the Flintshire Conservative party unawares. In the Denbigh constituency the local press speculated that the 1922 electoral contest would prove to be an ‘uphill fight’ for the Conservatives. The ‘dormancy’ of the association following the merger of the borough and county organisations meant that the party’s foundations were unstable. In addition their candidate, Ann Gwendolyn Brodrick, was unable to match J. C. Davies’ pedigree in terms of his public profile nor his involvement with local politics. As a non-Welsh speaking, blue-blooded female, she was disadvantaged from the outset by public preconceptions. Although she came from farming stock, her presence in the contest did little to trouble the Liberals. The election itself was fairly uneventful, with the press claiming that the electorate was uninspired by all three candidates.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, turnout figures show that in excess of three-quarters of all eligible voters did record their political preference. In many respects the outcome exceeded Conservative expectations given the seat’s Liberal tradition. Brodrick gained nearly 40 per cent of the votes cast. In part this may reflect the conservatism of the agricultural community – particularly farmers. However the result also mirrored the seat’s evolving social composition and the divisions within Liberal ranks. Rural areas were experiencing the effects of depopulation, whilst coastal resorts like Colwyn Bay and Abergele were expanding. Thus, political trends were in a state of transition. Moreover the divisions within the Liberal party diluted their support.

Whereas the vulnerability of the Liberal party partly facilitated Conservative growth in Denbigh, the collapse of the Coalition in Wrexham enabled Labour to emerge stronger than ever. In the 1922 contest neither the Conservatives nor the Liberals were willing to withdraw their candidates. Despite the protestations of Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, the

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<sup>44</sup> County Herald, 24 September 1920.



association's president, Conservative activists were eager to see their own representative stand. From the outset Major R. C. Roberts was never considered a strong contender to win the seat. Formerly the Chief Executive of the Ministry of Pensions for Wales, he was passionate to represent the needs of ex-servicemen. Indeed much of his campaign focused upon the necessity of ensuring that war veterans and their families received satisfactory pension terms. Yet the social and economic character of Wrexham put the Tories at a strong disadvantage. Despite Roberts' attempt to marginalise Evan R. Davies' campaign his efforts were unsuccessful.<sup>46</sup> In Flintshire, even though the local association had recently reorganised, the party was still caught unawares by the announcement of the contest. A local barrister was hastily drafted in as their new candidate. Indeed Austin Jones was a personal friend of the incumbent. Yet given Parry and the Liberals' following he stood little chance of victory.

By the time of the 1923 election Conservative associations, in the three constituencies that had 'live' organisations, had learnt important lessons from the previous contest. The most determined was Flintshire. Here activists had set to work immediately to improve their standing. In response to their defeat Central Office sent a speaker and organiser to work with the divisional association for an intensive six week period to streamline their political machinery and develop their strategy.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the announcement of the election in 1923 contest meant that they could put their training into practice. Indeed, in September 1923 the new Tory candidate, Goodman Roberts, had begun to lay the foundations of his campaign. In a letter to the editor of the *County Herald* he explained:

'People nowadays sort out their principles and decide whether they will

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<sup>45</sup> Denbighshire Free Press, 18 November 1922.

support the Constitutional party or the Socialists, the Government or the Opposition. Nothing is to be gained by a continuation of small factions in the House of Commons which jump first one way and then another, for all the world like so many political grasshoppers.’<sup>48</sup>

Ultimately Roberts’ campaign in 1923 was unsuccessful in this instance. Nonetheless table 2.3 shows that Liberal support was being eroded, and the popularity of Conservatism growing. The Tories managed to command 43.2 per cent of the vote. Moreover the dynamism displayed by Goodman Roberts contrasted greatly with the ailing Thomas Parry. Flintshire was far from being a ‘safe’ Liberal seat by the early 1920s, largely due to the Conservatives’ labours.

The party’s position was far more secure in Denbigh, where the 1922 contest had shown that the Conservatives had a substantial following. Ellis Davies’ Tory opponent was David Rhys. He had been adopted after Mrs. Brodrick’s ‘self sacrificing’ decision to step aside, and allow a young, Welsh speaking, man to represent the party.<sup>49</sup> Agriculture dominated his agenda. He pledged that a Conservative Government would introduce more generous grants for farmers. Although the *Denbighshire Free Press* described his campaign as being ‘lucid and well informed’, he was unable to overtake Davies’ support. However the result illustrated the fact that even in rural Wales the Liberals faced a serious challenge from the Conservatives, who won just over 40 per cent of the vote. A short time after Rhys departed the constituency, but the Conservatives’ efforts continued to gather momentum. Soon after

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<sup>46</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 3 November 1922

<sup>47</sup> Flintshire Conservative Party minutes, 7 July 1923, FRO.

<sup>48</sup> *County Herald*, 7 September 1923.

<sup>49</sup> *Denbighshire Free Press*, 17 November 1922.

Ann Brodrick returned as the party's candidate.<sup>50</sup> During the summer and early autumn of 1924 she went to great lengths to re-establish herself in the constituency. With the aid of both a full and part time agent she was able to conduct an extensive tour of the division.

The unexpected announcement of the 1924 election underlined the extent to which the Denbigh party had improved its machinery. It was more closely fought than the previous contest, with the local press judging both Davies and Brodrick to have conducted successful campaigns. Anticipating a Conservative revival the *Wrexham and North Wales Guardian* claimed that the Party's support would be more accurately reflected on this occasion. During the 'Free Trade' election the previous year it asserted that Ellis Davies had:

'...captured the Free Trade vote irrespective of party. There are many Lancashire Conservatives who are free traders in Colwyn Bay and district, and their votes will undoubtedly be cast this time for Mrs. Broderick, who is stating the issues of the election very ably.'<sup>51</sup>

Ultimately Brodrick was unsuccessful. Yet she did managed to slash the Liberals majority to 1,421 votes. Not all Conservative associations in the region enjoyed the same degree of success. Following Labour's two consecutive victories in 1922 and 1923, the 1924 election in Wrexham saw a change of strategy adopted by the division's Conservatives. Realising that they had little chance of winning the contest, Edmund Bushby withdrew his candidacy - despite the fact the *Wrexham and North Wales Guardian* reported that the 'Conservative

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid, 2 August 1924.

<sup>51</sup>Wrexham and North Wales Guardian, 24 October 1924.

rank and file were bitterly disappointed'.<sup>52</sup> The reality of the situation was that Bushby did not want to compete against his Liberal opponent as the candidate of the 'right', and thus dilute the anti-socialist vote. Furthermore this decision also gave the Conservatives more time to consolidate their position and collect more funds, as they could scarcely afford to fight another contest. In November 1923 it was revealed that they had a deficit balance of £115, which essentially threatened their existence. Thus the Liberals were victorious as a result of their absence.

The most impressive result for the Conservatives in this region, however, was witnessed in Flintshire. Mirroring national trends they swept to victory, casting the Liberals aside. This success marked the culmination of years of hard work. The previous year Lord Kenyon had addressed a conference of North Wales Conservatives with much praise of their labours. The *Montgomeryshire County Times* noted:

'He [Lord Kenyon] was convinced that with improved organisation it was possible to win some of the seats [in North Wales]. In many divisions re-organisation had started, and the outlook for the future was promising.'<sup>53</sup>

The significance of their victory in Flintshire was far reaching as it provided other associations in the region with the belief that their endeavours were not in vane. Nonetheless, the Liberals played a decisive role in this development. In Flintshire the Liberals lost around five thousand votes between 1923 and 1924 whilst the Conservatives gained almost as much, implying that in part this reversal of fortunes may be attributed to the frustrations and protestations of an angry electorate. The Conservatives had

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid, 17 October 1924.

demonstrated their willingness to embrace the needs of the constituency, in contrast to the indifference of the Liberal party. Evidently Goodman Roberts was a far more attractive proposition than Thomas Parry. The tide truly had changed.

If the early 1920s was a time for the Conservatives to consolidate their support, it was a period in which Labour established its roots in local communities and attempted to grow in strength and size. It was a time of transition and change. Initially progress was slow. In 1922 the party contested only two seats in the region. For the first time Flintshire had a Labour candidate, whilst a second attempt was made to take the Wrexham seat. In Flintshire the Rev. D.Gwynfryn Jones represented the party. Within the North Wales Labour movement he was an important and influential figure. Although he had little realistic chance of capturing the seat, this was an effective means of widening Labour support. The moderate stance adopted by Jones, coupled with his Welsh Nonconformist background, proved to be an attractive combination.<sup>54</sup> Members of the Flintshire Labour Party greeted the selection of the Rev. Jones with much delight. Moreover during his adoption meeting the *County Herald* reported:

‘A remarkable manifestation of enthusiasm was in evidence at the meeting, and those connected with the Labour movement in the county unhesitatingly state that at no period in the history of the Labour movement in Flintshire has so much enthusiasm been aroused.’<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 3 February 1923.

<sup>54</sup> According to the *Flintshire Observer* he was a well-known Wesleyan minister and a leading member of the County Council.

<sup>55</sup> *County Herald*, 23 November 1922.

Robert Richards, on the other hand, was in a far stronger position in Wrexham. Unlike Flintshire, here Labour had amassed a significant following.<sup>56</sup> The short sighted political vision of the Liberals and Conservatives contrasted with the vigour and ambition displayed by the Labour party, a drive that was rarely witnessed again by them during the inter-war period. Indeed, the *Wrexham Leader* highlighted the extensive preparations of the divisional association. Twenty-five local committees had been established in various polling districts, with the committee rooms 'filled with young electors'.<sup>57</sup> Labour's campaign underlined their moderate stance in North Wales, whilst at the same time encapsulating the progressive spirit of the national party's manifesto, *Labour's Call to the People*. The issues that dominated Robert Richards' agenda were agriculture, social reform and the need for industrial change. Nonetheless, his success cannot be attributed to Labour's consolidation alone. Other factors also played an influential role in the Party's victory here, notably the willingness of Labour's opponents to divide the anti-socialist vote.

The breakdown of the Coalition had considerable ramifications in Wrexham in particular. Whilst Sir R. J. Thomas had been swept to victory in 1918 on a tidal wave of national fervour, by the early 1920s many had lost faith in the government's promises. In the mining districts of the constituency, social problems had been compounded to a greater degree than ever before. The harsh economic climate, the lack of adequate housing and the lockouts of 1921, were conditions Labour exploited during the elections of this period. They put up a strong challenge to the established parties. The 1922 contest was tightly fought, but it gave Labour their first win in the seat with a majority of 3.2 per cent. In many respects this was both a symbolic and historic victory, as it shattered the Liberal

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<sup>56</sup> These consisted of members of the NWMA and those who supported the party in 1918.

hegemony and marked Labour's ascendancy in Wrexham. Like the Liberal euphoria in 1885, after breaking 169 years of Conservative domination, this was the start of a new era for Labour.

Such a marginal victory, though, meant that the Party could ill afford to be complacent. During the ensuing year attempts were made to encourage greater support. One of the most successful strategies, in this respect, was their promotion of social functions and activities. This was an attempt at garnering new political interest on lines which had been extremely successful in South Wales. Duncan Tanner notes that efforts in areas like Newport to hold neighbourhood organisations and functions had been successful in introducing a broader spectrum of potential supporters to the party.<sup>58</sup> Indeed during the 1920s all three of the main parties frequently employed this tactic. Nonetheless, probably the most impressively organised gathering in the region, at this time was the annual Labour Day celebrations staged by the Wrexham Labour Party at the Racecourse football ground. It represented the pinnacle of the party's social calendar as it combined family entertainment with hard-line activism. Having been started in 1921, by 1923 it managed to attract speakers of repute, like Emmanuel Shinwell, along with local trade union representatives.<sup>59</sup> Moreover it allowed the party to convey a serious message about society's inequalities in a relaxed and enthusiastic atmosphere.

Nevertheless the Party was not satisfied to confine its activities to urban areas. Beyond the region's industrial heartlands Labour was also eager to infiltrate rural areas in an attempt to broaden its appeal. Agricultural labourers in particular were regarded as an occupational

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<sup>57</sup> Wrexham Leader, 10 November 1922.

<sup>58</sup> D. M. Tanner, 'The pattern of Labour politics, 1918-1939' in The Labour Party in Wales, 1900-2000, op. cit, p.123.

<sup>59</sup> See local press reports of the events held on the first Saturday in May, held from the early 1920s onwards.

group who would benefit from closer association with the party. Yet due to the nature of their work, convincing them proved to be difficult. Although, as Alun Howkins has shown in his study of Norfolk, labourers could become receptive to Labour propaganda, the conditions of their employment were not conducive to socialism's traditional appeal and rhetoric. Despite the poor pay and conditions, the nature of agricultural work was often characterised by isolation and a respectful, close, working relationship with the employer.<sup>60</sup> Thus the type of close occupational ties shared by miners, which spilled over into their social lives, rarely existed in farming communities.<sup>61</sup> David Pretty notes:

‘Whatever the discontent among agricultural workers, it was extremely difficult to direct into a coherent movement. The concept of trade unionism was completely foreign to all but a handful. Men were only interested in the immediate gains like a reduction in hours; most seemed to have accepted that few farmers were able to afford any increase in wages.’<sup>62</sup>

In Denbigh little public enthusiasm had been articulated for Labour since the defeat of E. T. John in 1918. Indeed, a meeting held in the town of Denbigh in early 1923 indicated that no serious attempt to establish a constituency party had even been made. Conducted by D. Gwynfryn Jones and T. C. Morris, the National organiser for Wales and Monmouthshire, the meeting only managed to attract a small audience.<sup>63</sup> Despite this disappointing start,

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<sup>60</sup> Alun Howkins, Poor Labouring Men, London 1985. It is Howkins' assertion that the worsening economic climate and the distancing relationship between labourer and farmer facilitated the growth of Labour in Norfolk. The situation was slightly different in North Wales where paternalistic ties, in general, survived for longer.

<sup>61</sup> This is demonstrated in Chris Williams' study of the Rhondda.

<sup>62</sup> D. Pretty, The rural revolt that failed, Cardiff 1989, p.33.

<sup>63</sup> Denbighshire Free Press, 17 February 1923.



following a conference held in Colwyn Bay during November 1923, it was decided that enough support had been mustered to justify forming a divisional association.<sup>64</sup>

The situation was not quite as bleak in Montgomeryshire. Since 1919 the party had slowly been infiltrating local government and a small number of Labour supporters had been active in the Newtown area for some time. Whilst a divisional association had been in existence since 1920 it was not a 'live' organisation.<sup>65</sup> Thus, in June 1923 a conference of party and trade union delegates was convened to discuss creating a more active party. Present was T. C. Morris, and the local chairman, T. R. Bridgewater, who appealed for more members:

'...there was a strong need for a Labour party in Montgomeryshire if only for local reasons. They had at present a body of men in power (the County Council) who were doing considerable damage not only to the worker, but also to his children. The ruling powers in Montgomeryshire, the farmers, were now beginning to tell them they must economise. One way of economising was to serve them (the workers) with a class teacher who was not certified.'<sup>66</sup>

The tension between the farming community, who formed the basis of the constituency's 'establishment', and the industrial workers who were mostly located in Newtown and Welshpool, was clearly evident. Increased Labour activity in this constituency demonstrates the party's desire to ensure that workers were adequately represented. Yet given the occupational imbalance in the county as a whole, they only ever had a slim

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid, 10 November 1923. The national party's annual reports record that a constituency association was established in 1923, although no affiliation fees were received until 1926.

<sup>65</sup>Labour Party, National Annual Report, 1921.

<sup>66</sup>Montgomeryshire Express, 12 June 1923.

chance, at best, of securing Labour parliamentary representation. Nevertheless, there was a strong groundswell of agreement amongst Labour supporters that a political change had to be pursued. Many concurred with Morgan Jones' logic in October 1923, when he argued that whilst David Davies had done his best to represent them, the mere fact that he belonged to a different world where money was not an issue hindered his empathy with the 'ordinary' worker.<sup>67</sup> Despite the deeply held convictions of the party faithful, though, their numbers remained small. During an open-air meeting in Welshpool, the *County Times* reported that only about half a dozen supporters attended.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, during the election of 1923 the same paper reported that although the will to contest the seat was evident:

'...it is an open secret that though the headquarters of the party were prepared to provide a candidate, they thought so little of their chances in the constituency that they were not prepared to give any financial support, and the local Socialists could not raise the necessary funds.'<sup>69</sup>

Nonetheless, at this time the party was still growing in stature. The following year Labour received a further boost when a branch was formed in Llanfyllin. Shortly after the chief women's organiser for Wales, Elizabeth Andrews, visited Welshpool to encourage the town's ladies to form a women's section. Her pragmatic suggestions were well received, and the ideas she offered for topics of discussion at future meetings (housing, sanitation and labour saving appliances) were both relevant and timely. Thus a new section was born.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 2 October 1923.

<sup>68</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 23 June 1923.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 24 November 1923.

<sup>70</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 24 June 1924.

Whilst occupational divisions influenced organisational strategies in Wrexham, Denbigh and Montgomeryshire, it would seem that the situation in Flintshire was further complicated. Such considerations were crucial, yet here they also had to be balanced with the constituency's cultural profile as well. Politicians and activists were frequently undecided about its cultural and national identity, as its electorate was comparatively diverse. This raised the immediate dilemma of how policies should be presented. Whilst the Liberal Party continued to reinforce its close ties with Welsh society, certain elements of the Labour party were eager to forge an alliance between themselves and industrial workers from further afield. During a meeting in *Prestatyn in 1923, the area's close ties with the North West of England was discussed.*<sup>71</sup> For many this seaside resort was almost a 'suburb' of Liverpool or Manchester.<sup>72</sup>

Although party activists had been busily trying to stimulate and induce political change, the 1923 election caught many by surprise. Labour was not in a strong enough position to stand in all four constituencies and ultimately only contested Wrexham. Robert Richards was successful yet again. Several factors favoured his campaign. Neither the Liberal nor the Conservative candidates had stood in the constituency before, and both were of English descent. Most significantly, though, was the fact that the presence of two anti-socialist candidates strengthened Labour's chances, and ultimately secured Richards' return to Parliament. By the end of 1924 Labour enjoyed an improved and strengthened organisation throughout the region. Only in Denbigh did the party not have a candidate. The presence of a Labour candidate in the rural seat of Montgomeryshire in 1924 caused the first parliamentary contest in the seat since 1910. The party's first parliamentary candidate, Arthur Davies, embodied the 'respectable' face of the Party. In the same mould as Robert

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<sup>71</sup> County Herald, 23 February 1923.

Richards and D. Gwynfryn Jones, he was a native of the county and a Welsh speaking professional. A barrister by trade, he vowed to follow in the same tradition as Robert Owen. Previously he had been a Liberal supporter, but had been disillusioned by their ‘betrayal’ of Liberal values and principles during the War years.<sup>73</sup> Reflecting the nature of the constituency, agricultural and social matters dominated his agenda.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the unfavourable press coverage he received from the *Montgomeryshire County Times*, which claimed there was a ‘rising tide of feeling against socialism’, the *Montgomeryshire Express* was pleased to witness a political contest.<sup>75</sup> It said ‘we welcome the contest as an urgently needed stimulus to stagnated political interest’.<sup>76</sup> However it too supported Liberal efforts. The paper saw this contest as an opportunity for David Davies to demonstrate his ‘statesman-like’ appeal.<sup>77</sup> In a similar vein to the *County Times*, it conveyed its dismay at the behaviour of Labour supporters. Chiefly the newspaper was appalled at the lack of respect accorded to David Davies; they quoted one Labour supporter referring to him as the ‘moneybags of Llandinam’.<sup>78</sup> Thus, Arthur Davies’ brief appearance on the Montgomeryshire political scene was not long-lasting.

### Conclusion

By the mid 1920s both Labour and the Conservatives were actively trying to marginalise the Liberal Party and influence the loyalties and political perception of the electorate. The continuity between the methods employed in this respect is striking. In Flintshire and Denbigh - and Wrexham to a lesser extent - the assistance offered by Central Office was

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<sup>72</sup> *County Herald*, 23 November 1923.

<sup>73</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 21 October 1924.

<sup>74</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 25 October 1924.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 October 1924.

<sup>76</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express* 21 October 1924.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

both clear and consistent. Moreover, they encouraged lines of communication to be established between different divisional associations.<sup>79</sup> Labour failed to operate as successfully, although its regional federation organisers promoted similar actions. Aside from Wrexham, Labour's support in this region was limited to urban areas. However the party appreciated that change would not occur overnight. Also, the 'type' of candidate selected by Labour reflects an awareness of the cultural fabric of the constituencies they were contesting – and an astute attempt to redirect at least parliamentary campaigning.

In Flintshire and Wrexham, in particular, both parties posed a credible threat to the Liberals, a point which is illustrated by Labour's victories in 1922 and 1923, and the Conservatives' in 1924. They were fortunate to be guided through the political minefield by experienced advisers, who recognised the changing dynamics of society. By 1925, though, it would seem that the Liberal Party was beginning to comprehend the implications of these developments. They were unwilling to relinquish their hold over North East Wales. Thus they began to fight for their political existence, ushering in a new political phase.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>79</sup> For example Central Office officials encouraged the Denbigh Conservative Party to analyse the Flintshire Association's rules and regulations to see if they could organise themselves more efficiently.

## *Chapter 4*

### *The renaissance of Liberalism, 1925-1929*

The early 1920s had been difficult time for Liberalism in North East Wales. Few party activists in this region had hitherto understood the importance of reviewing their political strategies in order to withstand the challenge of Labour and the Conservatives. Hitherto the party had not been dynamic. In 1924 they were punished for their complacency. All four divisional associations had been unprepared for the election campaigns of 1922, 1923 and 1924. To a large extent this was because warring factions within the local parties were yet to be reconciled. Nonetheless, the Liberals' defeat in Flintshire, and the closely run contest in the normally 'safe' Liberal seat of Denbigh, heralded a turning point in their perception of the problems. Far from being defeated they were defiant in their outlook. Party organisers and activists began to realise it was possible to challenge their rivals. Thus between 1925 and the election of 1929 the party capitalized on the advantages they enjoyed. Their roots lay deep in the region's cultural fabric. Their efforts were eventually rewarded in 1929. Although this Liberal resurgence was short lived in many areas, it demonstrated that the party could compete successfully in a modern political contest, and could continue to provide a credible alternative to the dominant parties. Whilst generationally transmitted allegiances contributed to their success, this factor was becoming less important with each election campaign that passed. Not only did the Liberals realise that they needed to attract new voters – but also that rank and file energies had to be harnessed to do this. In this respect a considerable effort was made to improve organisation and strengthen their infrastructure.

*Restructuring and Organisation, 1925-1926*

The Liberals in North East Wales were not alone in their concerns about the future of their party. In general the 1924 contest had been a disaster, with the number of their parliamentary representatives falling from 158 to 40. Whilst it is understandable that such a poor performance would have disheartened many party members, for others this was the jolt that they needed to encourage action. This was a feeling that was not only keenly felt in Wales, but also in many different corners of the country. The Home Counties Liberal Federation's report of 1925 reflects this determination, and echoes the sentiments of those in North East Wales as they too looked to the future:

'This great disaster, instead of having a depressing, had a curiously stimulating effect on many constituencies. On Monday following the election, Dartford led the way of its own accord in trying to reorganise Liberalism and has been trying ever since. The League of Young Liberals sprang into new life, and fresh branches are being constantly called into existence all over the Home Counties. Constituencies we failed to fan any semblance of Liberalism into life in the years since the war spontaneously began to bestir themselves, to form associations, and to organise. Examples of such are Hythe, North Croyden, East Surrey, Horsham and Lewes.'<sup>1</sup>

Essentially two important lessons were learnt from their crushing defeat. Firstly, that they needed to develop a credible political strategy, and secondly that they had to broaden the base of their support and attract more female and younger voters. Welsh divisional

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<sup>1</sup> Home Counties Liberal Federation, Annual Report for 1925, p.12, Liberal Party Archive, DM 668, University of Bristol.



associations were quick to grasp these points. Addressing a party meeting, in January 1925, Ellis Davies voiced his concerns about the state of the party in Denbigh. He pointed out that whilst the party had gained its highest ever poll in 1923, the following year they had nearly been defeated. He claimed they were losing support in their agricultural heartlands, and more worryingly they were unable to attract the constituency's young people to their ranks.<sup>2</sup> 'Celt' in the *Liverpool Daily Post* expanded on this point, referring to the situation in Flintshire.<sup>3</sup> He offered this analysis:

'...it is felt that Liberalism does not mean exactly the same to the old as it does to the young; that the young men are not encouraged to become candidates, that some of the old local leaders, who have done good work in their day, are dangerously out of touch with modern political thought, and there is far too much speaking [as] if Gladstone were still alive and as if nothing had changed in the last fifty years.'<sup>4</sup>

'Celt' believed that the party needed to address current problems and issues, as opposed to harking back to a bygone age. Furthermore, to prevent others changing their allegiances to Labour, he asserted that ' a slight dash of recklessness in our Liberalism would do no harm'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Denbighshire Free Press*, 17 January 1925. Some commentators attributed their fall in popularity to Ellis Davies' vocal campaign for land reform.

<sup>3</sup> 'Celt's' columns were written by the journalist E. Morgan Humphreys who was sympathetic to the Liberal cause. His collection of papers in the National Library of Wales reveals his close ties with prominent party members and members of the Welsh Liberal establishment.

<sup>4</sup> *County Herald*, 27 March 1925.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Interestingly Ellis Davies himself eventually succumbed to Labour's appeal during the mid 1930s. Although he had retired from parliamentary politics by this time, it bears testimony to the disillusionment felt by many Liberal supporters.

The 1924 election further eroded the Liberals' political hold over the region. For many years the Conservatives and Labour had been publicly questioning the Liberals' relevance within the political arena. Now the divisional Liberal associations were forced to confront this question themselves. Indeed, this was a time of immense soul-searching, when agents had to face the inadequacies of their organisations. In Wrexham and Denbigh, associations took time to reflect on the causes of their declining support. However in the normally politically apathetic constituency of Montgomeryshire the desire for change meant that reform occurred at a more rapid pace. Clearly the contest they had fought in 1924, the first since 1910, had forced them to realise that they could ill afford to be complacent. Consequently, by May 1925 a sub-committee, composed of the party chairman, the agent and five other members, presented their recommendations for reform to the divisional association. In an attempt to extinguish the growth of Labour, their primary concern was to attract 'young blood' to their midst.<sup>6</sup> They proposed eight different changes to be introduced immediately: To have an unspecified proportion of young men and women on the Executive Committee. To raise awareness of their fund raising campaign for the 'million fund', and include those who contributed more than £1 on a 'roll of honour'. To publish a cheap, monthly, Liberal journal. To train new speakers. To establish separate organisations for young people and women. To organise more events with David Davies present. To invite more Welsh public speakers, and finally to establish a Liberal Club in Newtown.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, in a later meeting, it was decided that every district in the constituency should form its own local Liberal association.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Montgomeryshire Liberal Association Minute Book, 4 May 1925, NLW.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Perhaps one of the main reasons they wanted to establish a Liberal Club in Newtown was because the Labour Party already had a Club in existence here.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 21 July 1925.

Yet, whilst such ambitions underlined the Montgomeryshire Liberals' determination to ensure a popular following, circumstances prevented them from realising their full potential. David Davies' animosity towards Lloyd George, and his reluctance to adhere to the party line, effectively rendered him an unofficial Independent representative. Moreover, his disillusionment with the parliamentary system meant he rarely spoke publicly about matters that did not concern the League of Nations. Thus, paradoxically, the division's most visible symbol and embodiment of the party spirit went to great lengths to disassociate himself from the national party at every opportunity. However, Davies was by no means exceptional in his outlook. Like many other middle class Liberals he had given up the ghost on party politics, and instead concentrated on more 'worthy' interests – like the League of Nations – which transcended party barriers.

Although the Montgomeryshire Liberals needed to consolidate their support, the inactivity and weakness of their political rivals meant that they occupied a comparatively strong position. This was not the case in Wrexham. Here the Liberals were compelled to fight to retain their status as a majority party, since the Labour party had made such a strong breakthrough during the early 1920s. Similarly to other Liberal associations in North East Wales, it was during this period that the party responded most decisively to this challenge. The aim was to win back the support of industrial workers who, in the recent past, had deserted to Labour in substantial numbers.

The spirit of the Wrexham Liberal party was fairly buoyant as they had defied national trends and regained the seat in 1924, following two successive defeats at the hands of Labour. Soon after their victory the new Liberal representative, Christmas Williams, attempted to cultivate stronger ties with the constituency's industrial workers. Unlike some

of the party's former candidates, Williams was a local man. He had close family connections with the steelworkers of Brymbo. A campaign was launched to target industrial areas and encourage working men to attend Liberal meetings. Essentially this afforded the party an opportunity to reaffirm their sympathy with the plight of the constituency's miners, and underline the progressive credentials of their member. His opposition to the Eight Hour Bill was highlighted, along with his commitment to improve their working conditions.<sup>9</sup> This was a radical departure from the stance adopted by Evan R. Davies in 1922, who had little time or sympathy for their cause.

By 1926 the *Wrexham Leader* was reporting that a series of successful meetings had been held in mining areas like Rhos, Brynteg, Coedpoeth and Gwersyllt.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, attempting to understand the hardships facing workers was not enough in itself to challenge Labour's appeal. The Liberals realised that they had to offer a credible alternative. In an attempt to fill this need one of the major ideas that was promoted was the virtues of the newly established Liberal Trade Union. In essence the party was trying to appeal to the 'moderate' worker, and as this was not a militant area their desire to promote a union which favoured a more conciliatory approach to negotiation was not unreasonable. Indeed, during the mid to late 1920s J. Morris Roberts, the Liberal agent, reported that the organisation was attracting a respectable following. Addressing the party's Executive Committee he said:

'This organisation had come into existence quietly and without any flourish of trumpets, and is, in my opinion the most important step taken in the division, and

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<sup>9</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 18 August 1926.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

may in time and if warmly helped and encouraged, change the whole political atmosphere.’<sup>11</sup>

This was not simply a local initiative. It was part of a wider movement. The National League of Liberal Trade Unionists had been established following a conference which had brought together seventy representatives from different unions.<sup>12</sup> By January 1926 *The Liberal Agent* reported that 100 groups had been formed in ten separate districts. The movement’s guiding principle was its belief in the concept of collective bargaining and the desire to avoid the ‘dissension and disunity’ that was so evident within the Labour movement.<sup>13</sup> However, the union’s success in Wrexham was limited. J. Morris Roberts conceded that the majority of their members were small shopkeepers and shop workers who cherished the principle of free trade.<sup>14</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that the union’s membership included any industrial workers in the constituency, or that it gained popularity in any other division in North East Wales. Yet its existence, and the attempts made by the Wrexham party to promote its credentials, is testimony to their realisation that they had to claw back the support they had lost.

Whilst the Wrexham, Montgomeryshire and Denbigh Liberals tried to come to terms with their recent performance, and devise a strategy for the future, the Flintshire party retreated further from public life. Their defeat by the Conservatives had been both stinging and symbolic. A combination of factors had worked against them. Having Thomas Parry as their representative had bred an air of despondency and apathy within party circles. Although he had been a relatively active constituency MP during the Coalition years, from

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Vivian, ‘Liberal Trade Unionists: What agents can do’, *The Liberal Agent* 116, January 1926.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 18 August, 1926.

1922 onwards his failing health prevented him from carrying out his duties to the full. However as Sir Herbert Lewis [who was both a wealthy benefactor and a close personal friend of Lloyd George] supported him, his position had always been secure. This was despite the fact that he had been elected in 1922 and 1923 without making any public appearances. Thus, during this time it became increasingly difficult to motivate activists. The result of the 1924 contest should have forced them to seek a new representative as Parry failed to participate in any aspect of this campaign. The energy and the foresight that had once been the life blood of this organisation, more so than the other associations in the region, was being sapped as a consequence of his inertia. The despondency that was evident at grassroots level permeated the highest ranks of the local party. Such sentiments were far from being exclusive to the Flintshire party. Similar attitudes were also evident within other *divisional associations*.

In Wrexham J. Morris Roberts, the party's agent, despaired at the condition of his party. Despite their success in 1924, by 1926 he reported 'many Liberals took the most despondent view of the situation, and this despondency had a depressing effect on local Liberal associations'.<sup>15</sup> His main concern was that such attitudes threatened the survival of some local party branches, as formerly committed supporters were losing heart. Moreover Christmas Williams was anxious that the apathy amongst their 'traditional' voters meant that they would not turnout on election day.<sup>16</sup> The same concerns were echoed in the Denbigh division. J. Henry Morris-Jones, of the Colwyn Bay Liberals, confided in his diary in 1925 that the poor attendance at party meetings made his life as a chairman 'disheartening'.<sup>17</sup> Yet at least in Denbigh and Wrexham officials were monitoring the

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<sup>15</sup> Wrexham Leader, 23 April 1926.

<sup>16</sup> Wrexham Leader, 18 August 1926.

<sup>17</sup> J. H. Morris-Jones' diary, 26 January 1925. J. H. Morris-Jones MS, D/MJ/9, FRO.

situation. This was not apparent in Flintshire, and it was this apathy amongst the division's most prominent activists that was the greatest cause of concern.

### *The response of the national party*

Of course, local leaders alone could not be expected to revive the party single-handed. National leaders had to play the leading role. By 1925 Liberal headquarters were deeply concerned about the state of the party in the country. A concerted effort was made to strengthen the party's infrastructure and develop new policies that would prove to be both attractive and appealing to potential voters. In January 1925 a positive start was made to their campaign. During this month an interim report was drafted by the party's 'Enquiry Committee', which assessed the efforts of local associations to reorganise. Although this was an on-going process the committee had already reached some conclusions. It recognised that whilst the Conservatives could rely upon their 'vested interests' in the liquor trade and amongst the country's landowners, and Labour had union support, the Liberals' 'traditional' base was shrinking.<sup>18</sup> In view of these circumstances it was proposed that they would visit as many provincial centres as possible, like Manchester and Liverpool, to ascertain how local parties could extend their appeal.

Nonetheless, despite these good intentions centrally the party remained a deeply divided and fragile organisation. The response of the national party to the problems they faced was far from unified. Indeed, as the 1920s progressed circumstance was to further compound differences in Liberal ranks. Lloyd George's response to the Liberals' lagging fortunes was to initiate policy reform that would reaffirm the party's position as a practical and relevant decision making body. His personal fund, amassed during the Coalition years, financed the

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<sup>18</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> Draft of the Liberal Enquiry Committee, Interim Report, January 1925, Lloyd George MS, G/16/1/6, HLRO.

work of several autonomous committees to investigate different areas of policy and these frequently called upon the expertise of intellectuals associated with the Liberal Summer School movement. Indeed, the success of the Liberal Summer School did much to encourage Liberal hopes that they could offer a credible alternative to their political rivals.

Formed as the brainchild of the Manchester businessman Ernest Simon in 1921, the Liberal Summer School soon came to be regarded as one of the most innovative and influential gatherings of progressive thinkers during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Essentially it attracted Liberals who were disheartened with the attitude of party headquarters. Such sentiments are certainly evident from Simon's diary entries during the 1920s. In 1925 he complained:

‘...if we had a Gladstone who cared for the conditions of the people the fight would be worthwhile. But it is a bleak prospect to spend the next four years struggling to teach an apathetic rank and file something they wont trouble to learn.’<sup>19</sup>

In many respects the Summer School became the linchpin of liberal progressivism during this period. Although Trevor Wilson argues that the ambition of its members was to ‘pin prick’ the Tory government for its lack of reforming zeal and match Labour’s radicalism, this was only part of the group’s ambitions.<sup>20</sup> It represented a positive attempt to revive the Party as a credible intellectual force, and the general consensus amongst recent historians is that this aim was realised.<sup>21</sup> The fact that the movement had a separate identity from the official party very much worked in its favour. Indeed, the nature of members’ partisan

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<sup>19</sup> Ernest D. Simon Diary, 27 February 1925. E. D. Simon MS, MCRL.

<sup>20</sup> Trevor Wilson, The Downfall of the Liberal Party, 1914-1935, London 1970, p.215.



affiliation mattered little in this company. Consequently its organisers were able to invite the likes of G. D. H. Cole and Harold Laski to share a platform and to debate policy with Liberals such as Ramsay Muir and J. M. Keynes.

By 1923 the Liberal Summer School had established a formidable reputation, and their debates and deliberations featured frequently in the press. For example their 'New Way' series of lectures appeared in the *Daily News*.<sup>22</sup> Increasingly the party began to appreciate the Summer School's potential. In 1924 it officially recognised the movement's contribution to liberal thought, and invited some of its members to develop ideas in its new research department.<sup>23</sup> However, reflecting upon this decision in later years Ernest Simon regarded this as a sign of inherent weakness within the party. What had initially been a rebellious attempt to satisfy progressive, intellectual, minds now had a bearing on the course of the official party. He wrote in the *Contemporary Review* in 1929:

'Looking back, the change in our position as a Summer School in the last ten years is really very astonishing. From being a rebellious and negligible minority we have become accepted as the prophets of the party. In other words, it may be the case that our work is done, and it is about time [for] somebody else to come and start a Winter School, and get rid of us!'<sup>24</sup>

High profile members of the Summer School, like Muir and Keynes, were drafted in to assist with policy development, and during this period they were in part responsible for some important and influential documents. Amongst these, the first to be produced was the

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Freedon, *Liberalism Divided*, Oxford 1986, pp.125-6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p.96.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*,p.96.

<sup>24</sup> E. D. Simon, 'The Liberal Summer School', *Contemporary Review*, vol 136, 1929, pp. 274-279.

*Coal and Power* report in July 1924, followed by *The Land and the Nation* in late 1925, and *Britain's Industrial Future* in 1928. In practice these initiatives were to form the basis of the party's 1929 election manifesto.

Nonetheless, the nature of these suggested reforms failed to impress all Liberal members. *The Land and the Nation* caused particular controversy after its publication, horrifying some senior figures. Although this resurgence of Liberal ambition heralded an important phase for the party, the need to modernise and address new issues challenged the principles of some members. It was generally felt by more traditional party elements that the land policy, in particular, owed more to socialist as opposed to liberal ideas. They believed it essentially amounted to land nationalization. The scheme recommended the compulsory purchase of land by the state. The government would then lease the land to farmers and set a fixed rental price.

Nationally these reforms were coolly received, and in some instances drove activists and representatives out of the party. This was the case in Norwich where Edward Hilton Young defected to the Conservative party in 1926 citing the land policy as one of the reasons for his decision.<sup>25</sup> Neither was the policy generally welcomed in Wales. Opponents included Sir Alfred Mond, the Member for Carmarthen, who joined the Tories. J. Graham Jones offers a possible explanation. During the early 1920s a large number of Welsh freeholders bought their holdings. Thus many agriculturists were reluctant to reverse this arrangement.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless reactions cannot be generalised. In North East Wales they varied. In Denbigh Ellis Davies had been advocating the introduction of sweeping land

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<sup>25</sup> Barry M. Doyle, 'A conflict of interests? The local and national dimensions of middle class Liberalism, 1900-1935', *Parliamentary History*, 17, 1998, pp.131-140.

<sup>26</sup> J. G. Jones, 'Wales and the New Liberalism, 1926-1929', *The National Library of Wales Journal*, 22, 1981-2.

reform from as early as 1924. This had been the linchpin of his 1924 election campaign. Nevertheless, Liberal supporters had not warmed to his views. Gauging reactions within the division J. C. Davies commented on Davies' unpopularity in a letter to Haydn Jones.

'Re. Ellis Davies, it looks at present as if he were finally done for. I did not realize 'till a day or two before the poll the intensity of the feeling against him. I was in Llanrwst on Saturday and found that some of the most stalwart Liberals in the place worked hard and openly for Mrs. Brodrick (the Conservative candidate) because of their dissatisfaction with Ellis Davies and his policy, especially his land policy...It seems very unlikely that he will ever be adopted again in the constituency.'<sup>27</sup>

Denbigh was an agricultural constituency. It was here that the implications of Liberal land policy was felt most acutely. Party headquarters tried to spread the 'gospel' of their new policy through initiating conferences for local representatives, by using the Land campaign van and sending speakers to constituencies. Nonetheless its reception varied. In Montgomeryshire the local party's animosity was clearly illustrated through the actions of their parliamentary member. In many respects the publication of the party's 'Green Book' further confirmed David Davies' disillusionment with the party and with Lloyd George. His critique of the proposals was scathing. In a letter to the constituency party chairman he vented his frustrations. He asserted that the policy would do nothing to help the farming industry. Rather it would 'create a host of new officials; they will give a stimulus to farming from Whitehall'. These new responsibilities would 'add an additional burden to

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<sup>27</sup> J. C. Davies to H. H. Jones, 12 November 1924, Lady Haydn Jones MS, NLW, cited in J. G. Jones, 'Wales and the New Liberalism, 1926-1929', The National Library of Wales Journal, vol 22, 1981-2. [J. C. Davies was the former Liberal MP for Denbigh between 1922 and 1923].

the already overweighed finances of the country without any corresponding advantage'.<sup>28</sup> In 1927 he offered four specific reasons why the policy was unworkable. Firstly, he believed it was too socialistic in its nature. Secondly it would create too many officials. Thirdly it was too expensive to be implemented, and finally he pointed to the wisdom of the Scottish Liberals who rejected it on the grounds that it was impractical.<sup>29</sup> For Davies the Liberal party's traditional strengths were waning, whilst new efforts were revealing a vision that was incompatible with his own principles. His assessment of the land proposals was only one of many criticisms he held of the party. He went on to say:

'...we have during the past few months witnessed an unfortunate cleavage which has split the party in twain. Ever since the Coupon Election we have endeavoured as an Association to steer clear of Party quarrels, but recent events have made it almost impossible for anyone to advocate sincerely the return of this party to power. Without a policy, without leaders, this rudderless barque drifts aimlessly, whilst the political experience of our country since the advent of parliamentary institutions shows the futility of endeavouring to secure recognition of a third party.'<sup>30</sup>

By the end of 1926 Davies had made clear his intention to resign at the next election clear, citing three main reasons for his decision. The first was his rejection of the Green Book. The second was his disappointment over the party's handling of the General Strike. The third was the resignation of Asquith.

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<sup>28</sup> David Davies to Edward Jones, 14 July 1926, Llandinam MS, NLW.

<sup>29</sup> Montgomeryshire Liberal Association Minutes, 1 March 1927, NLW.

<sup>30</sup> David Davies to Edward Jones, 14 July 1926. Llandinam MS, NLW.

The General Strike brought into sharp focus the divisions that still existed within the Liberal party. Whilst Asquith supported the Baldwin administration's attempts to bring the dispute to an end, Lloyd George asserted that it was the government, in the first instance, who had exacerbated the industrial relations which had led to the unrest. His refusal to support the government's proposals heightened tensions within his own party. Generally most constituency parties were frustrated with the continual feuding seen in Westminster. This was true in Wrexham and Flintshire, although there is no evidence to suggest that their commitment to the Liberal cause declined in the short term. However this was not the case in Montgomeryshire, where David Davies' personal views dictated the official position of the local Liberal Association. In his letter of resignation he voiced his alarm and dismay that Lloyd George and his supporters had been 'willing to subordinate the interests of their country in the hope of snatching a Party or personal advantage out of the difficult situation'.<sup>31</sup> Moreover he was highly critical of the influence held by Lloyd George due to his personal fund. He said:

'Any confidence we may have felt in the supposed reunion of the Party was rudely shattered. It became clear that so long as two separate organisations and two separate funds existed within the Party there could be no hope of Liberal unity. When it is also remembered that one of these funds was accumulated by doubtful and devious means in the days of the Coalition Government and that this fund is now controlled exclusively by one person, it becomes obvious that the Liberal Party as we used to know it no longer exists. In its official form the organisation had now become the appendage of a private endowment.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> David Davies to Edward Jones, 15 November 1926, Llandinam MS, NLW.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

The culmination of Davies' dissatisfaction had been the enforced departure of Lord Oxford from the political scene, which he blamed solely on the 'intrigue and machinations' generated by the Georgite camp.<sup>33</sup> Thus reflecting upon the party's position he summed up:

'In coming to this definite decision I have been influenced by the supreme consideration that I could not honestly ask electors to support a Party whose policy is [no] longer based on Liberal principles, whose Parliamentary Leader is no longer to be trusted and whose organisation is no longer inspired by the true spirit of Liberalism. I am sure you will agree that it would be hypocritical on my part to allow my name to be put forward as the Liberal candidate under these circumstances.'<sup>34</sup>

Although his actions were extreme, David Davies' response to the events of 1926 were by no means exceptional. It was precisely this sort of adverse reaction that the party needed to avoid in order to prevent their position further weakening. Yet this was not quite the end of David Davies' parliamentary career. The divisional association were desperate to retain his services, fearing that his departure would allow the newly resurrected Conservative party in the county to capitalise on the vacuum of power. Consequently they appealed to his vanity in an attempt to persuade him to stay. In December 1926 a deputation of high ranking party officials met with Davies at his home to convince him to carry on with his work. The party saw personality and local influence as the way to survive, rather than a radical, nationwide, policy.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Following this visit Davies outlined his position in a letter to W. C. Black, one of the members of the deputation. Evidently two options had been discussed at the meeting. The first was for the party to accept Davies' resignation and seek to adopt a new candidate to stand at the next election. The second was for the Association to invite Davies to stand as an Independent Liberal candidate. However to the latter he tied in two conditions which were non-negotiable. In the first instance he demanded to be given free reign to sever connections with the official Liberal party, and secondly he would only agree to carry on with his work if he received the 'unanimous and spontaneous' support of the local party branches in the county.<sup>35</sup> Despite the eagerness of the executive committee to retain his services, Davies was not guaranteed the support of all local party members. His attendance in the Commons had been very poor, he rarely appeared in public to discuss matters of a political nature (apart from during election campaigns) and his hostility towards Lloyd George, who was still very much regarded as the Liberal hero of Wales, was well known.

Throughout January 1927 local associations met to discuss the situation. Whilst some happily endorsed their member, the *County Times* criticised the way in which others displayed a distinct lack of enthusiasm for Davies as a politician, but still voted for his continuation. Drawing particular attention to the apathy that prevailed within the ranks of the Newtown Liberals, it was reported:

'...his League of Nations activities received favourable comment, and even his wealth was referred to with satisfaction; but nobody at all was found to display any enthusiasm for him as a politician.'<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> David Davies to W. C. Black, 17 December 1926, Llandinam MS, NLW.

<sup>36</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 15 January 1927.

The implication here is that Davies won the unanimous approval of this particular association through a combination of apathy and fear. No clear contender to replace him had emerged, and moreover despite his obvious failings as a parliamentarian his good relations with the county Conservative party ensured that this was a 'safe' Liberal seat under his stewardship. Nonetheless the *County Times* was alarmed that the attitude of the Newtown Liberals reflected the underlying sentiment of many other local associations.<sup>37</sup> A confidential report prepared by T. Hughes Jones, the party's agent, offers an unprecedentedly detailed insight into the deliberations of nearly all the associations. It notes that rarely had so much responsibility been accorded to them. Thus, some rank and file members whose opinions usually counted for little seized upon this opportunity to vent their frustrations. Through this process it became apparent that many ordinary Liberal elements in the constituency were not satisfied with the way in which they were represented.

One important weakness that became apparent during this exercise was that the divisional association rarely consulted their members on policy issues. Discussion about the national party's policy initiatives was not encouraged, a point that was exemplified with regard to land policy. Summing up general trends, T. Hughes Jones makes the point that during party meetings 'without exception requests were made for explanations of the Rural Land Policy. Many felt that they were asked to approve or condemn a thing they knew nothing about'.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, those Liberals who supported Lloyd George felt unable to vote in

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<sup>37</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 15 January 1927.

<sup>38</sup> T. Hughes Jones, Summary of party deliberations (no official title), Llandinam MS, c. January 1927.



favour of Davies' resolution. Finally, many were anxious that by allowing him to become an Independent he would have too much of a 'free hand'.<sup>39</sup>

These were certainly the sentiments of the Machynlleth Liberals, who were one of the five associations to object to Davies' proposals. As one of the most influential branches in the constituency, its unanimous 72 votes against the re-selection of David Davies confirmed the frustrations felt in Liberal circles over the past year. Although they belonged to the minority group, their unwillingness to back down from a point of principle ultimately contributed to Davies' departure.<sup>40</sup> Following these developments, the Liberals faced an uncertain future. No longer could they be complacent about their success or financial situation as they could no longer rely on Davies' generosity. In 1927 it was revealed that of the £325 in their coffers, David Davies had donated £300.<sup>41</sup> Moreover the potential for conflict within the local party had finally been revealed. Whilst in the immediate aftermath of the Great War the Montgomeryshire Liberals had projected an image of unity, in comparison to neighbouring constituencies, although splits were beginning to emerge. By 1927, as the party became a more democratic body, splits began to turn into cracks. Whilst the existence of an all-powerful elite had suppressed the aspirations of members, it had also reduced conflict. Now the party was exposed to the same quarrels as other divisional parties. It had finally reverted to 'type'. They were beginning to conform to the national trends of their party.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Interestingly the Machynlleth Liberals were the only association in Montgomeryshire to vote unanimously to reject David Davies' proposals. Thirty two of the division's thirty seven associations voted in favour of David Davies.

*New beginnings: 1927-1929*

Between January 1927 and May 1929 the Liberal party in North East Wales underwent significant changes in terms of its representatives and organisation. During this period new candidates were adopted in Montgomeryshire, Flintshire and Denbigh. All influenced the outlook and perspective of their respective associations, to varying degrees. In general terms these men were far shrewder and politically aware than their predecessors. They embodied the party's new determination to compete with Labour and the Conservatives on their own terms – and diminish their standing. The Liberals were aware that they could no longer rely on their traditional supporters to elect them into power.

On a UK level this stance was rewarded. During these years the Liberals' performance in by-elections showed that they were making up the ground lost in 1924. Thirteen by-election contests were held during this period. The Liberals gained three of these seats, all at the expense of the Conservatives.<sup>42</sup> Indeed the electoral statistics reveal the extent to which the party was progressing:

Table 4.1

*Voting patterns in 13 by-election contests between 1927 and 1929*

| <i>Party</i>        | <i>1924 Election:<br/>Percentage of the<br/>vote</i> | <i>Seats won</i> | <i>1927-9 By-elections:<br/>Percentage of the<br/>vote</i> | <i>Seats won</i> |
|---------------------|--|------------------|--|------------------|
| <i>Conservative</i> | 48.7   | 13               | 38.8   | 7                |
| <i>Liberal</i>      | 26   | 0                | 30.7   | 3                |
| <i>Labour</i>       | 25.3   | 0                | 29.9   | 3                |

*Source:* M. Hart, 'The decline of the Liberal Party in Parliament and the constituencies, 1914-31', Unpublished D. Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 1982, p344.

Despite this apparent reversal of Liberal fortunes, Michael Hart points to the fact that the Liberal leadership was facing a major dilemma. The party's regional base of support was

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<sup>41</sup> Montgomeryshire County Times, 20 August 1927.

slowly eroding.<sup>43</sup> Consequently they could not allow complacency to breed within constituency organisations which needed to rebuild their position. Even though new life had flowed into the national party machinery, inspired by new and innovating policies, several important and confidential party memoranda paint a very bleak and depressing picture of the situation in the constituencies.

In April 1928 a report dealing directly with issues of propaganda and organisation, by Harold Storey, outlined the party's shortcomings at a local level. In contrast to the outward optimism of party officials, who predicted a Liberal revival, the tone of this secret memorandum was exceedingly gloomy. The aim of Storey's investigation had been to ascertain the activism of constituency organisations between the months of February and April 1928. The study was based on the number of party publications that associations had ordered during this period. It was believed this would be an effective means of gauging the extent to which party members were dedicated to the party's cause, and were actively introducing people to new national policies at a time when an election was on the horizon. What Storey discovered was a depressing situation. He wrote:

‘This return reveals the fact, that so far as these publications are concerned, the Party is operating in less than half, and probably in little more than one third of the constituencies in Great Britain.’<sup>44</sup>

Storey's major concern was that Liberals at a local level were not being informed of the party's most recent initiatives. Despite the fact that far more literature was being produced

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<sup>42</sup> These seats were: Bosworth, Lancaster and Holland with Boston.

<sup>43</sup> M. Hart, 'The decline of the Liberal Party in Parliament and the constituencies, 1914-31', unpublished, University of Oxford, D. Phil. thesis, unpublished, 1982, p.344.

<sup>44</sup> Harold Storey, 'Propaganda and Organisation', 27 April 1928, Lloyd George MS, G 31/3/17, HLRO.

than ever before, and specimen copies sent nationwide, it was the same one third of associations that were requesting the reading material. The basic problem, according to Storey, was that 'it is not more Associations that are at work. It is more work being done by the same Associations'.<sup>45</sup> According to his calculations of the 474 constituencies, which had Liberal organisations only 189 (33%) had ordered literature from party headquarters during these months. This was an alarming sign as:

'Settled neglect of Party publications is a characteristic; it is a sign; it means that in those places nothing of any kind is being done for Liberalism. The facts of this Memorandum suggest that such a state of Liberal stagnation prevails in more than 300 constituencies.'<sup>46</sup>

He went on to say:

'We have no means of reaching the electors of the 300 stagnant constituencies. Headquarters publishing departments cannot operate upon a constituency unless there is, at all events, a little group of people on the spot – a little local machine - to pass our printed words forward to the elector. Propaganda cannot go far in advance of organisation . Thus unless organisation can be expedited, it will presently be seen that our circulations of printed matter have come to a standstill.'<sup>47</sup>

With the prospect of an election looming, Storey believed that the party needed to adopt a new strategy to improve the party's ailing constituency organisations. In his mind 'the 300

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

stagnant Associations destroy in advance the chances of the Liberal Party at the General Election'.<sup>48</sup> Of these associations he believed only 150 had the potential to be reinvigorated – a task he was eager to initiate. To do so, he suggested an intensive publicity drive should be launched in each of these constituencies. This would heighten the party's profile, as it would take the form of a 'mass presentation for a Liberal Government' without 'too much regard for the cost'.<sup>49</sup>

Significantly the document's appendices reveals that not one of the four divisions in North East Wales Liberal had requested literature between February and April 1928. Consequently they would have been amongst these 300 constituencies Harold Storey was concerned about. Indeed, evaluating the Liberals' prospects in the region, the Wrexham party's agent, J. Morris Roberts, confirmed this pessimistic outlook. In a letter to his friend E. Morgan Humphreys, he held out little hope of the party's continued survival in the region:

'Really the Liberal position in North Wales is most serious and no one knows this better than you. R. T. J. and Ll. G. may retain Anglesey and Carnarvon District, but what of the others? If Haydn goes the seat will go. Carnarvonshire, Flintshire, East Denbigh and Montgomery (now that DD has withdrawn) are hopeless, and in a three cornered fight West Denbigh will also be lost. All our conferences are pathetically attended by the middle aged you can look in vain for the youth of Wales – while Nonconformist Ministers are conspicuous by their absence. Can't you do

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

something to lash North Wales Liberals into activity before it is too late?’<sup>50</sup>

As a Liberal himself, E. Morgan Humphreys frequently appealed to party activists as ‘Celt’ in the *Liverpool Daily Post*. In another letter Humphreys received, written by Albert Evans Jones (a Welsh academic who wrote under the bardic name of ‘Cynan’), he was invited to an unofficial gathering of like-minded Liberal intellectuals to discuss the party’s future. The correspondent’s disillusionment was evident. He wrote ‘that official Liberalism here [Wales] has ceased to show any intellectual spontaneity and creativeness’.<sup>51</sup> This was disheartening news for Wales. The Principality needed an indigenous, active, political community to take up radical ideas and develop them, making them appealing and relevant to a wider electorate. For Liberalism to survive it needed to foster such a community quickly – before it was too late.

Whilst prospects did appear bleak, all was not yet lost. The arrival of three new Liberal candidates on the scene in North East Wales had a positive impact. Constituency parties could no longer be complacent of their standing, and the selection of new representatives appeared to kick start sluggish organisational machineries. The dramatic withdrawal of David Davies as MP caused much anxiety for the Montgomeryshire association. It was feared that the party would lose some support due to the belief that it was his personal appeal that had ensured their success.<sup>52</sup> Moreover they feared the rise of Conservatism in

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<sup>50</sup> J. Morris Roberts to E. Morgan Humphreys, 28 March 1927, E. Morgan Humphreys MS, A/3036, NLW.

<sup>51</sup> Albert Evans Jones to E. Morgan Humphreys, 28 February 1927, E. Morgan Humphreys MS, A/1522, NLW.

<sup>52</sup> The degree to which David Davies was a much loved figure in the county is debatable. His appalling record as a constituency MP has already been discussed, moreover he rarely appeared in public except during election time. Indeed, in 1932 a presentation fund committee was set up to collect contributions from his former constituents to honour his contribution to Montgomeryshire. All local villages and towns were asked to make donations. However the committee were very disappointed to discover that very little effort had been devoted to this exercise, which was reflected in the small amount of money that was received. Montgomeryshire County Council records (Clerk’s department), Lord Davies of Llandinam presentation fund. MC/C/9/1-2, Po R. O.

the division. As a consequence the selection process for their new candidate proved to be eventful. More than anything else it illustrated the fact that the spirit of Liberalism in this county was changing, and that the influence exerted by certain, dominant, individuals within the organisations was beginning to wane. Indeed, it would seem that the consultation process the party had undergone in January 1927 had reaffirmed the power that rank and file members held. Some were very keen to use their voice again.

The two candidates vying for the party's adoption were Alford Jehu and Clement Davies. Initially it was Jehu who held the strongest position. He had been a prominent party member for many years, and could rely on the support of David Davies. Despite his decision to resign, David Davies remained the most powerful figure in the association. Rarely were resolutions passed which he had not approved. Thus in April 1927 when he outlined the criteria he believed the new candidate should meet, few were willing to openly question his judgment. He was eager for the new representative to possess views that were compatible with his own, and who might be influenced by his wisdom in the future. Davies made no secret of the fact that he believed Jehu was the ideal candidate for the job. Describing Davies' arrogance, the *Western Mail's* columnist 'Treorky' alleged that Lloyd George had made the following observation during this process:

'You know as well as I do that for the past twenty-one years the idea has been widely prevalent throughout the whole of Wales that David Davies is a sort of uncrowned King in Montgomeryshire, and that he carries the constituency in his pocket....He had come to regard himself in the county as the monarch of all he surveyed, and that the Parliamentary seat was absolutely his own

freehold possession...'<sup>53</sup>

Alford Jehu met the six point criteria laid out by David Davies perfectly. In the first instance Davies wanted an independent Liberal, not one whose campaign would be financed by the Lloyd George Fund. Secondly, the suitable candidate would have agricultural connections and an affinity with the farming community. Thirdly he was to be a local man. The fourth and fifth points were interrelated as it was asserted that the man in question should be a Welshman and a Welsh speaker. Finally, Davies believed it was 'preferable' for the candidate to be a Nonconformist.<sup>54</sup>

Clement Davies could not compete with Alford Jehu's reputation nor could he boast close connections to David Davies. Yet his dynamic and charismatic personality made him an attractive prospect nonetheless. Like Jehu he too had been raised in the county, spoke Welsh, and was also a nonconformist. In addition to this, he boasted a formidable reputation within the legal profession, having a successful and lucrative career as a barrister in London. Unlike his opponent, though, he distanced himself from the disputes within the national party, and was unwilling to criticise Lloyd George with the same zeal as either Jehu or David Davies. Later in November 1927 he described himself as 'a Liberal without a prefix or a suffix'.<sup>55</sup> He was also more radical than David Davies. In his statement to the Executive Committee he refused to condemn the 'Green Book', saying:

'I would point out that the Green Book ...is only a report on the Land System in this country...It does not contain a definite unalterable policy or programme. The fact that a number of able men have spent months in

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<sup>53</sup> Western Mail, 25 November 1927.

<sup>54</sup> David Davies to W. P. Phillips, 26 April 1927, Llandinam MS, NLW.



collecting evidence and in enquiry, not only in this country but abroad, demands from everyone serious consideration of the Report and their suggestions.’<sup>56</sup>

Alford Jehu’s statement echoed his wealthy patron’s resentment of the land policy and the Lloyd George Fund. He confirmed that the local party would not be expected to finance his personal expenses during the forthcoming election campaign. He noted that ‘Mr. David Davies has told me not to worry about expenses’.<sup>57</sup> However far from such a statement encouraging members of the Executive Committee to vote in his favour, it had the opposite effect. A letter sent by Garbett Edwards to David Davies’ secretary N. B. Foot (which included copies of the candidates’ statements) he spoke of Jehu’s unpopularity:

‘I think the Chief [David Davies] should know that if it had come to a vote between the two at the Executive Committee, in the opinion of several who were present not one single vote would have been recorded in favour of Mr. Jehu. I can further add of my own knowledge that his possible candidature is looked upon by many in the county with something approaching disgust...I think it particularly unfortunate that Mr. Jehu should have stated that Mr. Davies had told him ‘not to worry about expenses’. It has given the impression that Mr. Jehu is merely the mouthpiece and ‘puppet’ of Mr. Davies put up solely to keep out a possible Lloyd George candidate, and, frankly, I believe the majority of the Liberal Party in the county are not prepared to ‘stand for

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<sup>55</sup> Montgomeryshire Express, 22 November 1927.

<sup>56</sup> Garbett Edwards to N. B. Foot, 26 August 1927, Llandinam MS, NLW.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

this'.<sup>58</sup>

Clement Davies was officially adopted in November 1927, following a ballot of association members.<sup>59</sup> His selection brought to an end the all-consuming influence of David Davies over the party. Although following the 1929 election he became the association's new president, he rarely attended party meetings or functions and, significantly, considerably reduced his contributions to party coffers.

Clement Davies' adoption heralded an important milestone in the constituency party's history. In many respects he possessed the vigour and enthusiasm that progressive elements within the party had been trying to encourage. His predecessor had distanced himself too much to appreciate, and embrace, the attempts that were being made by headquarters to attract new supporters. David Davies' personal animosity towards Lloyd George prevented him from objectively evaluating policy initiatives. This was a divisional association that needed to be rebuilt. For decades David Davies' dominance had increasingly disillusioned party members. Only on rare occasions were they consulted and requested to give advice on party matters. Moreover, the lack of electoral contests held in the constituency and the weakness of their political rivals meant that they were unfamiliar with the nature of political competition. Upon his appointment as agent in 1923, T. Hughes Jones noted the extent to which apathy pervaded Liberal circles. Efforts were made from 1928 onwards to strengthen the party's organisational structure. A central finance committee was established, along with local committees in seven districts, in an attempt to swell party funds. Local associations were given an incentive to increase their activities in

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Montgomeryshire Liberal Association Minutes, 19 November 1927.

their communities through fund raising efforts. If they reached their quota amount they would be allowed to keep half of whatever was left to spend locally.<sup>60</sup>

Around this time the Flintshire party was also evolving. In May 1928 Thomas Parry announced his decision to retire as the Liberal representative. He had been out of office for nearly four years and for much of that time he had refrained from participating in local Liberal affairs. In many respects this was a positive development for the constituency party. Given Parry's campaigning record during the early 1920s he would probably have fared badly in an energetic campaign to regain the seat in 1929. Although the local association acknowledged his contribution as their representative, had Parry not possessed such illustrious political connections in Flintshire it is probable that he would have been ousted earlier.<sup>61</sup> Efforts were made to replace him immediately. The association was determined to win back the constituency from the Conservatives, yet in the forthcoming electoral contest it was not the Conservatives that they perceived as their greatest threat. The calibre of Labour's candidates in Flintshire and Wrexham had been consistently high over the past decade, and the late 1920s was no exception. The man selected to fight Labour's cause was Cyril O. Jones, a veteran party activist who had established an impressive reputation in the North Wales party and also as the NWMA's official solicitor.<sup>62</sup> Consequently it was felt that the Liberal candidate would have to be both experienced and progressive to withstand Jones' onslaught, and ensure that they did not lose any more ground amongst the electorate.

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<sup>60</sup> Montgomeryshire Liberal Association minutes, (n.d.) c. April 1928. NLW.

<sup>61</sup> See chapter 2. Thomas Parry's father had been the chairman of the Flintshire Liberal Association for many years, and was a close ally of J. Herbert Lewis, the former Flintshire MP.

<sup>62</sup> County Herald, 18 May 1928.

Mounting speculation in the local press suggested that Megan Lloyd George and Gomer Owen, the divisional party secretary, were being considered for this role.<sup>63</sup> However in July 1928 the identity of the new candidate was revealed. As the former Labour representative for Flintshire in 1918, Fred Llewellyn Jones had already made a name for himself within the county's political circles. Significantly he was also the brother of Cyril O. Jones. His reputation as a dedicated progressive and principled man went before him, and he certainly met the 'traditional' criteria of a Welsh Liberal candidate.<sup>64</sup> An educated, Welsh speaking, man he had long been established as a solicitor in the county, having practiced law in Mold, Holywell and Denbigh. Despite his brief dalliance with Labour, his commitment to the Flintshire Liberal Party had already been proven. He had acted successfully as the political agent for two of the county's former Members of Parliament, Samuel Smith in 1900 and Herbert Lewis in 1909 and 1920. He also counted Lloyd George as one of his personal friends, having worked closely with him as a member of 'Cymru Fydd'.<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless the extent to which he supported the former Premier was not initially disclosed when his candidacy was being considered. Those party members who had little time for Lloyd George hoped that their new representative would adopt a sterner line against his initiatives than Thomas Parry. Indeed, Henry Gladstone, illustrating the power of local patronage, revealed his intention to donate £2000 to finance a candidate who opposed Lloyd George in July 1927.<sup>66</sup> Moreover in June 1928 he wrote to his brother, saying that one of the local association's most prominent members, Thomas Waterhouse, could not be considered for the role owing to the fact that he had fallen under Lloyd

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> County Herald, 13 July 1928.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Henry Gladstone to Herbert Gladstone, 23 July 1927, Glynne-Gladstone MS, File 967.

George's 'influence'.<sup>67</sup> Gladstone's strong feelings illustrate the extent to which tensions ran high within the party. In later correspondences with his brother Herbert, and with Fred Llewellyn Jones, Henry Gladstone communicated his indignation following the adoption of a candidate who readily accepted the wishes of the party leadership. The divisions within the party thus remained firmly intact. Nevertheless, the mere fact that they had selected a candidate who had great energy and enthusiasm, despite Llewellyn Jones' advancing years, brought new life to the Flintshire association.<sup>68</sup>

Llewellyn Jones' arrival on the political scene coincided with renewed activism in the party. Meetings were held at greater frequency and new members were attracted to their ranks. In particular the Flintshire Liberals led the way in promoting female involvement in party matters. Although a handful of prominent women had occupied roles on most of the party's executive committees in North East Wales, it was only during the mid to late 1920s that interest was beginning to be shown in establishing separate organisations specifically for women. Nationally the party had been promoting this idea for some time. The Women's Liberal Federation had been founded in 1887, with Catherine Gladstone as its first President. From the outset Liberal women had enjoyed effective control over their organisation, with their own council, executive, annual conference, programme and publications.<sup>69</sup> In the early 1920s the *Liberal Agent* was emphasising the advantages of forming women's groups as a means of improving electoral prospects. It advised agents that female activists provided a very valuable service to the party. Generally their organisational skills were excellent, and could be put to good use through arranging fund

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<sup>67</sup> Henry Gladstone to Herbert Gladstone, 8 June 1928. Glynne-Gladstone MS File 968.

<sup>68</sup> Fred Llewellyn Jones was 62 years of age when he was adopted by the Flintshire Liberals in 1928.

<sup>69</sup> Martin Pugh, The March of the Women: A revisionist analysis of the campaign for women's suffrage, 1866-1914, Oxford, 2000, p.133.

raising activities and social functions.<sup>70</sup> Table 4.2 outlines the nature of women's involvement in the Liberal politics of North East Wales during this period:

Table 4.2

*Membership Figures for the Women's Liberal Federation in North East Wales, 1918-27*

| Constituency      | Association             | 1919 | 1920 | 1921 | 1922 | 1923 | 1924 | 1925 | 1926 | 1927 |
|-------------------|-------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <b>Flintshire</b> | Caergwre                | -    | 47   | 30   | 30   | 30   | -    | -    | -    | -    |
|                   | Flint                   | -    | 25   | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
|                   | Hawarden                | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | 47   | 64   |
|                   | Holywell                | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | 20   | 200  | 300  |
|                   | Prestatyn               | -    | 40   | 30   | 25   | 26   | 25   | 100  | 120  | 120  |
|                   | Shotton                 | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | 52   |
|                   | Rhyl                    | -    | 150  | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
| <b>Denbigh</b>    | *Abergele               | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | 30   |
|                   | Colwyn Bay              | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | 106  | 120  | 150  |
|                   | *Denbigh                | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
|                   | *Llanrwst               | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
|                   | *Ruthin                 | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
| <b>Wrexham</b>    | Broughton & Brynteg     | -    | 20   | 20   | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
|                   | Brymbo                  | -    | 25   | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
|                   | Coedpoeth               | -    | 36   | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
|                   | Llangollen              | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
|                   | New Broughton & Gwenfro | -    | 45   | 102  | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
|                   | Rhos                    | -    | 65   | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
|                   | Rhostyllen              | -    | 12   | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    | -    |
| Wrexham           | -                       | 1000 | 126  | 126  | 60   | 60   | 126  | 126  | 126  |      |
| <b>Monts</b>      | Llanfyllin              | -    | 60   | 60   | 30   | 30   | 30   | 30   | 30   | -    |

\* Although Women's sections existed in these towns no membership figures were submitted to the WLF.

Source: WLF Annual reports, 1918-27.

The fortunes of these associations were mixed. Whilst some failed to retain interest, others, particularly in Holywell, Colwyn Bay and Prestatyn, fared much better. Essentially they were strongest in areas where the party itself was active in the community, which is

<sup>70</sup> 'Women's work in our political organisations' Liberal Agent, issue 102, January 1921.

testimony to the revival of Liberalism in Flintshire, and along the North Wales coast.<sup>71</sup> Writing in the Women's Liberal Federation journal, the Flintshire party's agent, Gomer Owen, underlined the importance of motivating female members to attract greater support. He asserted that the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 had placed them in an even stronger role, and it was now their duty to target new voters. Moreover, he encouraged them to adopt a 'scientific' and methodical approach to the study of electoral registers.<sup>72</sup> With regard to his own constituency, Owen's motivational drive was succeeding. Table 4.2 illustrates the extent to which the Flintshire groups were gaining popularity. Indeed, in May 1928 the Holywell women's group was awarded a shield, presented by Margaret Lloyd George, in recognition of its efforts in recruiting the most female members over the past year.<sup>73</sup> Under the formidable leadership of Mrs. Waterhouse, the wife of Thomas Waterhouse, the association had been steered into a powerful position. Thus, at a time when Liberalism on a national level was in crisis, Holywell Liberals could boast the loyalty of 300 women, *despite their Conservative representation in Parliament. This clearly signaled that their fight was not yet over.*

### *The 1929 General Election*

Liberal hopes of a revival rested upon their success in the 1929 election. It was widely hoped and anticipated within the party that they would win enough seats to hold the balance of power in the next Parliament.<sup>74</sup> In terms of developing policy initiatives they had certainly invested a great deal of time and effort. Their manifesto encapsulated ideas they had been developing over the past few years, put together by a host of renowned

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<sup>71</sup> Although the WLF reports fail to note this fact, it would seem that during the Coalition years Liberal and Conservative women co-operated together. Hence membership figures in the town of Wrexham probably reflects their combined numbers.

<sup>72</sup> Gomer Owen, 'Getting Ready', *The Liberal Woman's News*, No. 80, October 1928.

<sup>73</sup> *County Herald*, 25 May 1928.

intellectuals and academics. One of the main areas it addressed was unemployment. During early 1929 *We can conquer unemployment* was published. Many of the proposals contained in this pamphlet provided the basis of the unemployment policy which the party advanced in its manifesto a few months later. Essentially the party wanted to see more employment opportunities initiated by the state. To this end, and also in an attempt to improve the country's infrastructure, they suggested the creation of road and house building programmes, the extension of the telephone system and land reclamation. This was a radical programme – a challenge to both Labour and their own party's more moderate members.

In contrast to earlier campaigns, the Liberals' drive in North East Wales was ostensibly dictated by these national policies. Little attention was devoted to local issues, although some candidates did attempt to illustrate the practical local implications of the national programme. Fred Llewellyn Jones, for example, discussed the benefits of improving Flintshire's roads. Addressing an audience in Mold he asserted that there was enough resurfacing work to be done to occupy the county's unemployed for three years.<sup>75</sup>

As anticipated the election proved to be a testing time for the party. Contests were held in all four constituencies, with only the Denbigh division not facing a three cornered competition.

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<sup>74</sup> Michael Hart, 'The decline of Liberalism in Parliament and the constituencies, 1914-1931', unpublished University of Oxford, D.Phil thesis, 1982, p.344.



Table 4.3

Results of 1929 Election in North East Wales

| <i>Constituency</i>    | <i>Candidate</i>   | <i>Party</i> | <i>Number of votes</i> | <i>Percentage of vote</i> | <i>Majority</i> | <i>Turnout</i> |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <i>Denbigh</i>         | J. H. Morris-Jones | Lib          | 21305                  | 61.9                      | 23.8%           | 79.7%          |
|                        | A. C. Graham       | Con          | 13116                  | 38.1                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Flintshire</i>      | F. Llewellyn Jones | Lib          | 24012                  | 43.0                      | 8               | 81.3%          |
|                        | E. H. G. Roberts   | Con          | 19536                  | 35.0                      | -               | -              |
|                        | C. O. Jones        | Lab          | 12310                  | 22.0                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Montgomeryshire</i> | E. C. Davies       | Lib          | 12779                  | 46.5                      | 7.8%            | 88.3%          |
|                        | J. M. Naylor       | Con          | 10651                  | 38.7                      | -               | -              |
|                        | J. Evans           | Lab          | 4069                   | 14.8                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Wrexham</i>         | R. Richards        | Lab          | 20584                  | 46.4                      | 14.9%           | 84.9%          |
|                        | C. P. Williams     | Lib          | 13997                  | 31.5                      | -               | -              |
|                        | E. F. Bushby       | Con          | 9820                   | 22.1                      | -               | -              |

Source: F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, Glasgow 1969.

Of all the divisional associations, it was the *Denbigh Liberals* who enjoyed the most advantages going in to the election. Despite the fact that their candidate, Dr. J. Henry Morris-Jones, had only recently been adopted as Ellis Davies' replacement, the party was secure in the knowledge that their opponents were very weak.<sup>76</sup> The Labour party was still encountering great problems as they attempted to establish an electoral base, and thus on this occasion decided not to finance a candidate. On the other hand the Conservatives had been forced to draft in, at short notice, a representative who was little known outside party circles. Mrs. Brodrick's sudden withdrawal a month before polling day, due to ill health, rendered them without strong representation. Nonetheless, reflecting upon the Liberals' fortune, *Celt* warned:

'In the opinion of those who know the constituency [Denbigh West] well,

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<sup>75</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 17 May 1929.

the threat to Liberalism is from the Tory rather than from the Labour direction. In a three-cornered fight a Tory victory might very well be a possibility.’<sup>77</sup>

Henry Morris-Jones was a well established party figure. For many years he had been the chairman of the Colwyn Bay Liberal association and by 1929 he was also chair of the divisional party. Indeed, even prior to Ellis Davies’ invitation to stand in 1924 he had harboured aspirations of becoming the Liberal candidate.<sup>78</sup> *Celt* judged Morris-Jones’ campaign to have been a great success. Although he failed to discuss at length the implications of his party’s policy initiatives, which was probably a deliberate and wise decision on his behalf, *Celt* notes that his appeal extended right from the genteel coastal communities of Colwyn Bay to the agricultural areas of the Ruthin area.<sup>79</sup>

Whilst the contest in Denbigh failed to evoke high tensions, the situation was quite the opposite in Montgomeryshire. Not only was this Clement Davies’ first election, it was also the constituency’s first three-cornered contest. Although previously, in 1924, David Davies had faced a Labour opponent, Davies could attract voters on the basis of his experience and reputation. The only advantage Clement Davies possessed was that he was representing a party which had become almost part of the division’s cultural identity. Ideologically little separated Davies and the Conservative candidate, J. Murray Naylor. Both placed equal emphasis on issues like unemployment and agriculture and led very active campaigns.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ellis Davies retired from the seat in March 1929.

<sup>77</sup> *Celt* writing in the Liverpool Post and Mercury, 8 April 1929.

<sup>78</sup> Lloyd George to J. H. Morris-Jones, 22 November 1923, J. H. Morris-Jones MS, D MJ 36, FRO.

<sup>79</sup> Liverpool Post and Mercury, 25 April 1929.

<sup>80</sup> Montgomeryshire Express, 30 April, 1929.

Clement Davies' eventual victory produced the constituency's highest poll during the inter-war period, with turnout nearing 90 per cent. The contest between the Liberals and the Conservatives was tightly fought, with just over two thousand votes separating both candidates.<sup>81</sup> Davies won in spite of his predecessor's refusal to publicly support his candidacy. Although the Liberal association pleaded for him to share a platform with Clement Davies, the only message of support received was a telegram, read out at a public meeting at the end of the campaign. Indeed, J. Evans-Thomas, the divisional party chairman, wrote to David Davies asserting that his absence from the campaign was 'liable to misinterpretation by our opponents'.<sup>82</sup> Clement Davies had not been his choice of candidate from the outset, a fact which soured their relationship. A decade later, in 1939, Clement Davies wrote to his predecessor reflecting on his nomination and the events leading up to the 1929 election:

'When you resigned, I was approached time and time again to stand as the Liberal candidate - but never by you. I did not want to stand. My work at the Bar, as the leader of the Commercial Court was taking all my time... At last I gave way.... Imagine my feelings when I found you opposing me... You failed to impose your will upon the Liberals of Montgomery though you had been their member for 25 years. Did you accept their verdict? I was opposed by the strongest possible Conservative candidate who I believe would have beaten you - and I strongly suspect in your heart of hearts you thought so too. You never gave me the slightest support - but kept aloof - until polling day when you kindly lent me your car.'<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> The overall turnout in Montgomeryshire was 88.3%. The Liberals enjoyed a majority of only 7.8%.

<sup>82</sup> J. Evans-Thomas to David Davies, 7 May 1929, Llandinam MS.

Davies won despite David Davies' behaviour. As a Liberal, though, he held a great advantage over his opponent. The party's name and reputation carried great influence, regardless of who was representing it.

In Wrexham and Flintshire the party could no longer rely on traditional factors to ensure victory. Whilst Montgomeryshire had experienced little demographic, linguistic or industrial change during the early twentieth century, this was certainly not the case for these two constituencies. Initially the Wrexham Liberals were confident that they could retain the seat. The *Wrexham Leader* reported that in July 1928 they were uncharacteristically optimistic about their chances, and were meeting on a frequent basis.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, at this time their positive spirits were justified. During May 1928 the Liberals of the Penycae ward had been rewarded for their hard work and dedication to the party. Over the year they had succeeded in winning the county council seat, and also gained control of the parish and district councils.<sup>85</sup> This was a success story that party leaders hoped would inspire the divisional association as a whole.

However in 1929 the Liberals did not possess the same advantages as they done in 1924. During the previous contest the withdrawal of the Conservative candidate allowed them a clear run against Labour. This time, though, the Tories were unwilling to make such a self-sacrificing gesture. An energetic campaign was mounted, and contrary to Denbigh and Montgomeryshire, the Liberals here dealt extensively with their party's policy to tackle unemployment. Moreover, they attracted the likes of Herbert Samuel to the constituency to promote their cause and expand upon the party's vision.<sup>86</sup> Yet despite Christmas Williams'

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<sup>83</sup> Clement Davies to David Davies, 3 January 1939, Clement Davies MS, I 1 4, NLW.

<sup>84</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 13 July 1928.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 18 May 1928.

<sup>86</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 26 April 1929.

best efforts, the Liberals continued to be perceived as the party of the 'right' in Wrexham. Even though the policies they espoused were both far reaching and progressive, they failed to make a distinct impression. Thus Labour benefited from the division in the anti-socialist vote.

The Flintshire Liberals faced a different situation. They were determined to regain the seat from the clutches of the Conservatives. Compared with previous Liberal efforts, Fred Llewellyn Jones displayed both vision and dynamism in his tour of the constituency. As in Wrexham a great deal of attention was devoted to the new policies adopted by the party. Both the unemployment and land policies were discussed and promoted at length. Furthermore, Jones was rewarded for his loyalty to Lloyd George when the man himself visited Rhyl and spoke affectionately about Jones' qualities. The *Denbighshire Free Press* summarised Lloyd George's opinion of his 'old friend':

'They had been associated in work for Wales and for Welsh Liberalism for many years [more] than he cared to think. Mr. Llewellyn Jones was one of those young men whom he remembered so well, and whom he was sure his bearers had not forgotten – men who made a great impression upon the history of this country by their efforts. They included Tom Ellis, William Jones, Ellis Griffith, Sam Evans...and Mr. Llewellyn Jones was certainly one of that group...'<sup>87</sup>

Yet the emergence of Fred Llewellyn Jones as Liberal candidate is not enough, in itself, to explain the party's resounding victory in 1929. Indeed the scale of their success should be

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<sup>87</sup> *Denbighshire Free Press*, 25 May 1929.

placed into context. Their revival following the departure of Thomas Parry coincided with a surge in the county's population. Between 1924 and 1929 the electorate increased by over 17,000. All parties benefited from this growth. However table 4.3 shows that it was the Liberals who made the greatest net gain. Within the space of five years they had amassed nearly 10,000 extra votes. Whilst an increase of such proportions must be attributed to many different factors, on a local level it would be fair to assume that invigorated efforts in the constituency's local communities contributed towards this momentous victory. The Conservatives trailed in their shadow, whilst Labour's popularity also increased.

### Conclusion

The Flintshire Liberals demonstrated that it was possible to revive interest in the party. Within the space of a year they had resurrected a tired and disillusioned association into one which was ready to face the challenge of their political opponents. Nevertheless, in contrast to other divisional associations, they did not need to create a new infrastructure within their organisation as it had been in place since 1919. Yet Flintshire Liberals were not alone in their desire for change. Whilst Montgomeryshire failed to retain the services of David Davies, the emergence of Clement Davies at least encouraged Liberals to consider the future of their party. No longer did a single person dominate the party. However the main disadvantage of this was that members were more likely to be divided on issues than ever before. The Denbigh Liberals continued to seek greater harmony amongst their ranks, and in the short term Henry Morris-Jones appeased both sides of the Liberal divide within his constituency. Yet the party's resurgence did little to improve the prospects of the Wrexham Liberals. Their case was hopeless once their Conservative opponents announced their intention to pursue their own campaign in 1929.

Nonetheless the North East Wales Liberals were far more successful than the national party. In total the Liberals only managed to win 59 seats, which constituted only 10 per cent of parliamentary seats. Although the result did not reflect their increased popular vote, which had grown from 17.6 per cent in 1924 to 23.4 per cent in 1929, this was a huge disappointment given the effort that had been devoted to resurrecting the party. Evidently the innovative policies that had been developed failed to make an impression on the electorate. Many party representatives did not have sufficient understanding of how these proposals would operate to provide an in-depth analysis of their benefits. In other cases, this distinct lack of discussion or enthusiasm was tactical. Local associations feared adopting radical ideas as they were apprehensive of dividing the rank and file. Moreover, despite the far reaching implications of these policies and their significance, by this time the Liberal party was no longer regarded as a dynamic force by the electorate. In socially deprived areas like Glasgow, South Wales and the North East of England, where once their unemployment proposals would have resonated with voters, Labour had overtaken them as the party of the working classes.<sup>88</sup> On a smaller scale this was reflected in Wrexham. By the time the election was announced Liberal ideas had also lost their novelty value. Labour and the Conservatives had also been allowed time to consider their response to the proposals. Liberal ideas lacked popular credibility, even before they were attacked by the larger parties.

Whilst the national party was disappointed with the results of the 1929 election, the situation in North East Wales was more positive. Despite the gloomy predictions of respected, local, party members and supporters as late as 1928, Liberalism was still a live

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<sup>88</sup> Michael Hart, *op.cit.*

force in the region. In Flintshire and Montgomeryshire in particular, divisional associations had demonstrated their capacity to operate under difficult circumstances and had proved that no one individual was bigger than the party as a whole. To retain their hold they now needed to consolidate their position. However unbeknown to them national forces would again interfere with their position, as they had done immediately after the war.



## *Chapter 5*

### *The consolidation and growth of the opposition, 1925-1929*

The 1924 election was an important milestone for both the Conservative and Labour parties in North East Wales. It represented the culmination of their efforts to displace the Liberal party. Nonetheless whilst the contest confirmed to the Tories that their efforts had not been in vain, it signalled to Labour that more ground work was required to secure their position. This challenges the conventional view of Labour's growth. Historians such as Chris Cook have assumed that by 1924 the party had established itself within the political fabric of the nation, and that class politics had done its work in marginalizing the Liberal party.<sup>1</sup> Even Mike Savage's work on the importance of gender, as well as class, does not challenge the idea that Labour had arrived as a force by this time. More recently, however, such assumptions have been questioned. Duncan Tanner's work has shown that perhaps Labour's success was not 'guaranteed' even in mining areas. Rather it was dependent on what electoral support the party could construct.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, its success in 1929 may have been a consequence of its attempt to develop a broader appeal judging from the large number of socially mixed seats it captured in the election of this year.<sup>3</sup> The challenge Labour faced, not only in North East Wales but on a national level, was to develop its electoral base and establish its reputation as a plausible force in the face of stronger opposition from the Conservatives than used to be recognised. These are not aspects which have received much attention in the literature on Wales, even though Labour's development in North Wales was gradual and uneven and evidently incomplete by 1924. Although Labour had accomplished much since the 'coupon' election it had not

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<sup>1</sup> C. Cook, *The age of alignment: Electoral politics in Britain, 1922-1929*, Bristol 1975, pp.50-55.

<sup>2</sup> D. M. Tanner, 'The Labour party and electoral politics in the coalfields', in A. Campbell, N. Fishman & D. Howell, (eds) *Miners, Unions and Politics 1910-1947*, Aldershot 1996, pp.78-85.

successfully permeated non-union and non-industrial circles by the mid 1920s. The growth both parties experienced during the early 1920s had been neither inevitable nor easy; nor could they relax their efforts if they were to continue to taste parliamentary success on a regular basis. The Liberals had illustrated the dangers of complacency. To sustain success and consolidate their base they could ill afford to lose focus, especially given the resurgence of the Liberal party after 1924.

*A new chapter for the Tories? Organisational matters, 1925 - 1926*

The Conservative victory in Flintshire in 1924 had far reaching implications. It provided hope for Tories throughout North Wales. It inspired organisations in areas where the party had previously failed to make much of an impression or attract enthusiastic support. In Montgomeryshire the party was resurrected (it had not met since 1913). Prior to the 1924 election a preliminary meeting of former party members convened to discuss re-forming the Association.<sup>4</sup> Following their deliberations it was decided that they could provide a credible opposition to the Liberals. Having been in 'cold storage' for such a long time, their first priority at the inaugural meeting in January 1925 was to discuss their strategy and vision for the future.<sup>5</sup> Paralleling the techniques adopted by the Flintshire and Denbigh parties, their initial aim was to re-ignite interest in local communities, and establish branches in the heart of Montgomeryshire's villages and towns.

Their efforts were rewarded within a relatively short space of time. During the first few months of 1925 branches of the party had been formed in 33 of the constituency's 45

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<sup>3</sup> D. M. Tanner, 'Class voting and radical politics: the Liberal and Labour parties, 1910-1931', in M. Talyor & J. Lawrence, (eds), Party, state and society, Aldershot 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Montgomeryshire County Times, 14 June 1924.

<sup>5</sup> Montgomeryshire Express, 13 January 1925.

polling districts, and 84 meetings had been held in the division by April.<sup>6</sup> Moreover by March 1926 there had been a noticeable upsurge in the membership of the recently re-opened Welshpool Conservative Club.<sup>7</sup> Frank Waddington, the North Wales agent, congratulated them on their achievement, and observed that the party now had a divisional association in every North Wales constituency.<sup>8</sup> The initial growth of the Tory party in Montgomeryshire surpassed the expectations of even the most ardent party activists. Yet the prevalence of Conservative support in the division had been a factor that the *Montgomeryshire County Times* had discussed in its editorials for many years. Whilst apathy pervaded Liberal ranks, it claimed there was an appetite amongst Tory supporters for improved representation. The county's 'establishment' may have been inherently Liberal, but Conservative traditions had not died in the aftermath of Stuart Rendel's victory in 1880.<sup>9</sup>

D. M. Jehu, the Tory agent, was acutely aware of the disillusionment felt by many rank and file Liberals in the constituency. Whilst prominent activists attempted to revise and review party strategy, their main stumbling block was the attitude of David Davies himself. This was a situation which the Conservatives could capitalise upon. At the Conservative annual general meeting in 1926, Jehu was keen to highlight the weaknesses of their rivals. Despite the fact that the Liberals did have party branches in the majority of districts, this was yet to be achieved by their women's groups. In addition, he also noted that Labour still lacked an organisational structure - which meant its efforts were largely uncoordinated in the division.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Jehu was not afraid to spell out his own party's failings either.

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<sup>6</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 11 April 1925.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 13 March 1926. Membership had increased to 120 members.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 11 April 1925.

<sup>9</sup> For many decades during the nineteenth century the Conservatives had dominated Montgomeryshire politics. However this changed in 1880 when Stuart Rendel won back the seat for the Liberal party.

<sup>10</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 13 March 1926.

Whilst the Tories were gaining momentum in the division's smaller towns and villages, he was anxious that their appeal had not extended to the larger, more populous, areas. They needed to broaden their base if they were to replace the Liberals.

In a constituency where the incumbent Member of Parliament was so firmly entrenched, any challengers faced an uphill battle. To afford themselves the greatest advantage in any future electoral contest, the Conservatives adopted a new candidate shortly after their 'resurrection'. It was hoped that by the time an election campaign was launched their representative would be an established figure in the community. J. Murray Naylor was selected as the Conservative candidate in 1925, primarily due his unblemished reputation within the constituency. A Cambridge graduate, he was both a prominent county councillor and a farmer. Indeed, his candidacy was welcomed by both the Liberal and Conservative press. The *Montgomeryshire Express* said of him:

'It will be a pleasure for the Liberal Party to meet the challenge of a gentleman whose dignity and honour assure a very different election campaign from the last which was despoiled by a shameless orgy of Socialism.'<sup>11</sup>

However the paper continued by offering a further insight into Naylor's politics:

'The domestic policies which Mr. Naylor outlined before the Primrose League at Llanfyllin...are by no means the monopoly of Toryism; they are essentially Liberal in conception and principle, and therefore one wonders why Mr. Naylor with his

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<sup>11</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 2 June 1925.

own particular views on Protection and other questions of foremost important should have chosen the Tory platform for his political debut!'<sup>12</sup>

Although Naylor was considered a strong candidate, his politics were an amalgamation of Tory and Liberal policies – and thus at times contradictory. As the *Montgomeryshire Express* observed, his views on protectionism were unclear. For example, he readily acknowledged the benefits of Free Trade.<sup>13</sup> In other constituencies his position would have been perceived in a negative light – but not in Montgomeryshire. Whilst he was not an attractive prospect for hard line Conservative supporters, he offered a more youthful alternative to David Davies which might have appealed to either conservative minded or disillusioned Liberals. Thus, the Tories were playing a calculated political game in this division.

Similarly the Wrexham Conservatives were also eager to strengthen their position. The withdrawal of Edmund Bushby from the 1924 contest had disheartened and angered many activists. In this constituency it was the Liberals who were perceived as the main party of the 'right'. This was an impression the Tories were desperate to counter. However the first priority of divisional leaders had to be the maintenance of party spirits. Given their weak position in the constituency, they could ill afford party activists losing heart and giving up on the cause. Unlike the Flintshire Liberals, who were in a similar position in terms of morale in 1925, the intervention of Central Office did not allow this to happen. Meetings were to be held on a monthly basis. Moreover Frank Waddington spelled out the clear purpose and the worth of the party. He wanted the Conservatives to 'counteract any

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<sup>12</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 9 June 1925.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Socialist propaganda work which might be going on in the Division'.<sup>14</sup> The party had to be proactive.

With their mission clearly defined, the party set to work in order to overcome the 'menace' posed by Labour. Party minutes reveal their determination to rid the constituency of the influence of socialism. They were sensitive to the fact that the best way this could be achieved was for the anti-socialist vote not to be split in a general election. Thus, having withdrawn from the 1924 contest, they argued that it was the moral obligation of the Liberals to stand aside at the next election. This was also the message they had received from Central Office, which stated that on 'no account' should their candidate stand down.<sup>15</sup> Whilst such a demand was unrealistic it did imbue supporters with greater confidence in the party.

The intervention of Central Office meant that the Wrexham Conservative Association remained a focused body with a sense of direction. They could easily have unravelled in 1925, as the Liberals in Flintshire had done. However the appointment of professional organisers ensured their cohesion. By 1926 they were back on course. At the start of this year their candidate, Edmund Bushby, attracted much local press attention when a knighthood was bestowed upon him. Their busy social calendar illustrates the revived efforts of activists.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore the arrival of national party figures in their midst, like Lord Eustace Percy, bolstered interest.<sup>17</sup> Significantly, though, whilst they hosted lavish fetes and social functions they did not attempt to broaden their political appeal. No mention was made of the suffering endured by local communities due to the industrial

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<sup>14</sup> Wrexham Conservative Party minutes, 5 January 1925, NLW.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 20 July 1925.

<sup>16</sup> *Wrexham and North Wales Guardian*, 6 January 1926.

<sup>17</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 23 April 1926.

unrest. In many respects they were an inward looking and parochial party. They failed to reflect national efforts to attract working class support, yet possessed ambitious expectations of expanding their electoral base with no realistic concept of how that could be realised.

The determination of the national party to extend the appeal of Conservatism beyond its traditional social boundaries had passed over the Wrexham party. In part this could be attributed to the fact that local activists did not have the necessary political acumen to realise what could be achieved. Throughout the interwar period the national party's success had rested on its appeal to the working class vote. Ross McKibbin argues that without the almost consistent support of around a third of the working classes the Conservatives would not have been such a dominant force.<sup>18</sup> Indeed at a national level the party underwent considerable change from 1918 onwards. As T. J. Hollins notes, 'the Conservative Party, fearing the effects of 'socialist' and 'communist' propaganda, awaited an electoral disaster that never came'.<sup>19</sup> Between 1918 and 1928 the British electorate trebled. The party was fearful that more youthful and uneducated voters would be convinced by the hollow promises of extremist parties. As David Jarvis has observed, there existed an interesting dichotomy between their insecurity on the one hand and their impressive electoral success on the other.<sup>2</sup> They were desperate to be seen as the party of the 'people'.

To make this point an intensive propaganda campaign was launched which was unparalleled by either the Liberals or Labour. J. C. C. Davidson, the party's chief publicity officer, and the Conservative chairman, Sir Joseph Ball, had grasped the potential power of

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<sup>18</sup> Ross McKibbin, *The ideologies of class*, Oxford 1996, pp.259-260.

<sup>19</sup> T. J. Hollins, 'The Conservative party and film propaganda between the wars', *English Historical Review*, vol. 96, 1981, p.359.

new forms of communication. With radio audiences reaching 15 million and newsreels 20 million they quickly identified the power these sources held. Here the Conservatives enjoyed a clear advantage over their political rivals. Sian Nicholas notes that they were able to indirectly influence the content of these new mediums as Central Office enjoyed good relations with the proprietors and editors of companies such as Pathe, Gaumont-British and Movietone.<sup>21</sup> In their promotion of popular Conservatism, the image of Stanley Baldwin lay at the heart of most of their campaigns. His appeal appeared to transcend conventional class barriers. In essence he embodied the personal qualities, such as modesty and dedication, that were generally admired in British society.<sup>22</sup> Whilst such strategies did little to convince those who rejected the Conservative party on ideological grounds, the potential to attract voters who were anti-socialist was considerable.

Conservative efforts in Wrexham did not reflect the national party's drive. Activists here failed to take full advantage of the guidance offered by Central Office. Nevertheless this attitude was not indicative of the Conservatives in the region as a whole. In Flintshire and Denbigh the party adopted a far more proactive role in the local community and encouraged a socially wider membership through their functions. They also made better use of the help that was on offer to them through the party machinery.

Even though the Conservatives' performance in the 1924 contest in Denbigh had exceeded expectations, the following year they too were experiencing difficulties. Their agent, J. Farnsworth, was aware that organisational changes were necessary. In April 1925 he

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<sup>20</sup> David Jarvis, 'The Conservative Party and the politics of gender, 1900-1939' in M. Francis & I. Zweiniger-Bargelowska (eds), *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880-1990*, Cardiff 1996.

<sup>21</sup> Sian Nicholas, 'The construction of a national identity: Stanley Baldwin, 'Englishness' and the mass media' in M. Francis & I. Zweiniger-Bargelowska (eds), *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880-1990*, Cardiff 1990.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



announced that the association was to be reformed and streamlined. The division was to be split into two separate associations, northern and southern area. Each would be responsible for the activities of the branches within their jurisdiction.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless the success enjoyed by these associations was mixed. Despite the best efforts of the agent and activists, some areas were more active and vocal in their support of the party than others. The chairman of the Denbigh branch was extremely pessimistic about the party's future. Despite a vigorous campaign, in which 500 promotional flyers were posted encouraging people to join, the association's membership failed to exceed twenty-three.<sup>24</sup> In the neighbouring town of Ruthin, though, the party's prospects were far brighter. Their association was attracting a strong following, and during the inaugural meeting of the town's Junior Imperial League it was reported that 150 young members had been recruited.<sup>25</sup> Throughout this period Farnsworth continued to persevere with a strategy designed to increase the party's popularity. In his view, whilst the Liberals remained a 'live force' in the division his party could not afford to relent. Thus in December 1926 a campaign was launched to inform the electorate of the policies and principles of the party. In the Northern area alone 30,000 pamphlets were printed, in English and Welsh, for distribution.<sup>26</sup>

Significantly it was the Flintshire association who were the least active during the period immediately following the 1924 contest. After years of hard work and dedicated campaigning, Goodman Roberts' victory allowed them some time to relax. Arrangements for social gatherings and functions dominated their agenda, as opposed to political and organisational matters. Whilst they continued to have a strong presence in the community,

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<sup>23</sup> Denbighshire Free Press, 19 September 1925.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 January 1925.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 February 1926.

the recent realisation of their long-term goal was not necessarily beneficial for them as an organisation. They had worked effectively under pressure, but without any clear motivation to channel their energies they were in danger of losing ground. These actions would suggest that they assumed the seat was safely in their hands.

### *The fall and rise of Labour, 1925-1928*

Labour's growth in North East Wales was a gradual process. The party failed to make the same dramatic impact as it had done in the industrial south. Its development was slow and at times awkward. Duncan Tanner points to the fact that in North Wales the party was forced to rely on the dedication of a small band of activists to generate support and co-ordinate efforts. A practical socialism as opposed to sweeping radicalism, was the order of the day.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore it needed to counter its image problem. Tanner notes:

‘In north Wales...Labour was portrayed as anti-religious, anti-Welsh, anti-national, anti-rural, opposed to the upward mobility of the small man. It was the sharp voice of a vulgar proletarianism, rising above its cultural and intellectual station and masquerading as the workers' party.’<sup>28</sup>

This was certainly the case in divisions like Montgomeryshire and Denbigh, where the party was also depicted negatively in the local press. Nonetheless, the increasing presence of their candidates in local and parliamentary elections afforded the party an opportunity to counter this impression. By 1925 all four constituencies in North East Wales had been contested by Labour candidates. Yet aside from the Wrexham Labour party, their

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<sup>26</sup> Denbigh Division Conservatives, Northern Area minutes, 16 December 1926, DD DM 80 3, DRO. The subjects of these pamphlets were not disclosed.

<sup>27</sup> D. M. Tanner, ‘The pattern of Labour politics, 1918-39’ in D.M. Tanner, C. Williams & D. Hopkin. (eds), The Labour Party in Wales, 1900-2000, Cardiff 2000, p.114.

divisional associations were very weak and regularly needed the attention of the Welsh area organisers. From the mid 1920s onwards, North Wales Labour activists campaigned for the party to appoint a full time organiser specifically for North Wales. It was felt that the burden of work placed on the Welsh organisers was too heavy to be carried out efficiently. Hence North Wales was neglected. Indeed the minutes of the North Wales Labour Council reveal the depth of perceived neglect felt amongst its members. They also believed that North Wales ought to be represented independently on the party's National Executive Committee. Furthermore they called for more Welsh language material, and in general felt the region's particular concerns were not receiving the attention they deserved.

In May 1924 the former Flintshire candidate, Rev. D. Gwynfryn Jones, was nominated as the Council's candidate for the position of North Wales Labour organiser.<sup>29</sup> The Wrexham Labour party had been instrumental in initiating this development. It had successfully lobbied the Flintshire and Merioneth parties to support the idea of such an appointment.<sup>30</sup> Despite their protests, though, their efforts were in vain. The national party were not interested in their claims. The local parties also received little help in creating the policies necessary to compete and challenge in areas where trade unionism and heavy industry were not key features. It was not until after the Second World War that the party had an infrastructure capable of delivering this. In the 1920s the party depended on middle class candidates for this purpose. With the exception of Wrexham, parties in North East Wales found it hard to attract affluent, moderate, candidates who would 'nurse' the seat and develop the associations' strength.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p.115.

<sup>29</sup> North Wales Labour Council minutes, 31 May 1924, Huw T. Edwards MS, C1, NLW.

<sup>30</sup> Wrexham Trades Council and Divisional Labour party minutes, 6 July 1927, DRO.

Whilst the 1924 election had far reaching implications for the Liberal party it also had great significance for Labour. Nationally they lost forty seats, despite fielding considerably more candidates.<sup>31</sup> They also paid heavily for the impact of the Campbell case and the appearance of the Zinoviev letter. Following the defeat of Robert Richards in Wrexham, their parliamentary voice in North Wales had disappeared. This was a major setback. Even though the Liberals had always had the potential to win back the seat, Labour had enjoyed two successive victories. Thus, in the aftermath of the election, local party leaders had to work hard to ensure that morale did not collapse. The party minutes reveal the pragmatism of Wrexham's leaders. No consoling words were recorded. Rather they retained a determined and positive attitude and regarded their defeat as only a minor set-back. They intended to further facilitate the party's growth within the division. Their commitment in both ideological and financial terms was clear.

In December 1924 it was decided that a permanent, full time, organiser be appointed. Whilst this had been the case during election campaigns, in between contests the agent worked on a part time basis.<sup>32</sup> It was also recognised that the party needed to become a more cohesive body. Cyril O. Jones urged members to adopt a unified approach to politics and to develop a firm grasp of Labour policies. He argued that all representatives, on whatever level, should be speaking the same language. Indeed in the divisional party's conference he moved the following resolution:

‘That it is advisable for all Labour Members of a Local Authority to have a clear agreed policy on matters such as Housing, Health, Education and Electricity Supply, and with the view of formulating a programme

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<sup>31</sup> In total 87 more candidates were financed in 1924 than 1923.

<sup>32</sup> Wrexham Trades Council and Divisional Labour Party minutes, 21 December 1924, DD/DM 344/2. DRO.

it is desirable that the Labour members of each Local Authority should meet in Joint Conference every three months.’<sup>33</sup>

The fact that such a resolution was necessary indicates that the party was still evolving. It was regarded necessary to guide local activists. Party members welcomed the resolution. More than the Liberals and the Conservatives, they *recognised the importance of local politics*. Essentially this was a means of permeating local communities and representing the working classes at grassroots level. Moreover, if they did so in a cohesive manner, not as independent individuals – as was common in North Wales – the party as a whole would benefit through the creation of a ‘party’ vote. Having witnessed the way in which Coalition alliances had weakened their political opponents between 1918 and 1922, they were determined not to enter into any pacts to improve prospects in the short term. At the same conference J. T. Edwards moved:

‘That in future Labour candidates for Local Government Bodies shall not enter into agreement or pact with representatives of other Political Groups or Parties, and that each and every candidate selected by the Local Labour Party shall definitely stand on the Labour Party programme and that Labour Candidates will speak in support of the Labour candidates and will only accept assistance from members of the Labour Party.’<sup>34</sup>

The mounting industrial problems witnessed in this mining division from the mid 1920s onwards, encouraged the party to become a more focused body. To a certain extent they provided the means through which their members and supporters could channel and

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 4 July 1925, DD/DM/344 3, DRO.

harness their protests. The social problems encountered at this time touched the lives of many people. In the summer of 1925 the area was hit by three major set-backs. The closure of the Llay Main and Vauxhall collieries, and the liquidation of the Cambrian Ironworks, meant that nearly 4000 workers were made redundant. The closure of Llay Main came in the wake of the miners' refusal to accept the requests of the owners to reduce coal prices in May 1925, which would have meant pay cuts for the workers.<sup>35</sup> Significantly it was the largest and newest pit in the Wrexham area, employing 2,600 men.<sup>36</sup> The implications of this were both devastating and far reaching. The village of Llay was regarded as a model mining community, with most of its inhabitants relying on the colliery for their livelihood. Indeed, over 100 houses had been built to accommodate workers' families.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless the NWMA and the Labour party endorsed the stand taken by the miners. *Speaking at an open-air demonstration at Rhos in July 1925*, the union's secretary, Hugh Hughes, proclaimed that the miners were 'faced with an unparalleled crisis in the industry'.<sup>38</sup> He asserted that colliery owners were exploiting the position of the miner by encouraging them to take wage cuts. He feared that if workers adhered to such terms their families could not be supported adequately. Yet he was angered by the response of the government and their local MP. He alleged that neither appreciated nor sympathised wholly with the predicament of the miner. Whilst Christmas Williams had visited some of the worst affected areas and had offered his full support, without the endorsement of their policy of nationalisation the NWMA regarded his efforts as futile.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 29 May 1925.

<sup>36</sup> The closure of the Vauxhall Colliery meant that 700 jobs were at risk, and the liquidation of the Cambrian Ironworks saw 950 workers made redundant.

<sup>37</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 12 June 1925.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 24 July 1925.

At this time the Labour party was the only local political organisation to provide financial support for the miners. Their fund raising activity was not the consequence of a cynical desire to improve their political standing; rather it was a genuine attempt to rid the suffering and hardships endured by the very people they sought to represent – the working classes. From the summer of 1925 onwards the Wrexham Board of Guardians recorded their concern for the growing numbers of unemployed who were approaching them for assistance. These were primarily men who were not eligible to receive unemployment benefit; desperation had driven them to seek poor law assistance and accept the inherent stigma that was attached to it. By early July 1925 the Relieving Officer, F. T. Cheatham, noted that he had received 120 new applications as a direct result of the closure of Llay Main and anticipated an additional 250 due to the closure of the Vauxhall colliery.<sup>39</sup> Reacting to the worsening industrial situation, Labour established a relief fund for local *miners and their families*. Collections were made locally and fundraising activities were organised. One of the high points was a concert, staged in Wrexham, which was attended by J. H. Thomas. Addressing this audience, Hugh Hughes made the point that even a few months after its closure the community of Llay was in great distress. Already 1200 men were receiving unemployment benefit, and another 600 were dependent on poor law relief. Furthermore an additional 200 to 300 single men were not in receipt of any income.<sup>40</sup> The General Strike of May 1926, however, made the situation far more grave. By June 1926 it was revealed that a quarter of the population under the jurisdiction of the Wrexham Board of Guardians, 18,970 people in total, were in receipt of financial assistance.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore it was estimated that between 70 to 80 per cent of single men in the area, who were not eligible to receive such assistance, had no means of sustaining themselves.<sup>42</sup> In September

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 3 July 1925.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 21 August 1925

<sup>41</sup> Wrexham and North Wales Guardian, 23 June 1926.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

1926 Cyril Jones announced that the distress fund had raised over £3000. Significantly many of the contributions had ‘come from the poorest of community’. Nonetheless, due to the high demands on the fund only £200 remained in its coffers by this time.<sup>43</sup>

This was certainly a testing time for Labour. Party members felt a strong sense of responsibility towards the working classes, but at the same time struggled to keep them afloat as a political organisation. They too encountered financial difficulties during this period. The reluctance of the trade unions and the inability of individual members to pay their affiliation and membership fees were cited as the main reasons why they were in debt. In July 1925 their overdraft stood at just over £32, and throughout this period they were constantly battling to keep their finances out of the red.<sup>44</sup> Table 5.1 shows that membership figures supposedly reached 360 in 1928. Although figures increased thereafter, their *growth was slow*.

Table 5.1

*Membership rates of divisional Labour association in North East Wales 1928-1936*

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Denbigh</i> | <i>Flintshire</i> | <i>Montgomery</i> | <i>Wrexham</i> |
|-------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 1928        | 180            | 360               | 180               | 360            |
| 1929        | 150            | 360               | 158               | 360            |
| 1930        | 240            | 670               | 240               | 1022           |
| 1931        | 240            | 828               | 348               | 683            |
| 1932        | 240            | 925               | 240               | 850            |
| 1933        | 240            | 481               | 240               | 723            |
| 1934        | 240            | 480               | 240               | 652            |
| 1935        | 240            | 577               | 240               | 755            |
| 1936        | 240            | 374               | 240               | 910            |

Source. Annual Reports of the Labour party, 1929-1937

Nonetheless party leaders strove to ensure morale was kept as high as possible despite the grim realities of unemployment. A. J. Cook visited the division in July 1925, and gave an

<sup>43</sup> Wrexham Trades Council and Divisional Labour Party Minutes, 7 September 1926. DRO.



impassioned speech at the Racecourse football ground to a capacity crowd. The purpose of his visit, in essence, was to remind the town's miners why they were striking. Demands for a 'living wage' and a reduction in working hours were the central themes of his address.<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless the limited financial assistance received by the miners, derived from either government or local Labour party sources, was not enough in the long term to sustain the miners and their families during the prolonged strike. It was reported that by October 1926 between four and five thousand men in North Wales had returned to their jobs, and settled for offers well below the demands of their unions. Cyril Jones labelled them as 'traitors to their class', however the *Wrexham Leader*, which had consistently been sympathetic to the plight of the miners, argued that deprivation, and in some cases starvation, had driven many back.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately pragmatism overcame conviction. Whilst the middle class leaders of the Wrexham Labour party could afford the financial consequences of their convictions, the majority of those they represented could not. Yet during this period party officials demonstrated that they were not simply a 'talking shop', and had shown that a practical socialism could be applied on a grassroots level. The well-being of the mining community was first and foremost in their minds.

Elsewhere in North East Wales economic problems were not as severe. The fall out of the General Strike was not as intense. Although urban and industrial areas were hit, the disruption was on a much smaller scale. Moreover the divisional Labour parties of Denbigh, Montgomeryshire and Flintshire, to a lesser degree, were not sufficiently

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 28 July 1925.

<sup>45</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 9 July 1926.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 8 October, 1926. It was reported that the following mines had begun producing coal again in North Wales: Argoed Main, Black Lane, Brynkinallt, Brynmally, Elm, Englefield, Gatewen, Plas Power, Gresford, Ifton, Llay Main, Llay Hall, Hafod & Vauxhall.

embedded in their constituency's cultural fabric to identify the needs of their communities. In reality these associations were struggling to survive and to retain the interest of existing activists. In Flintshire, the NWMA was battling to retain members. More and more were leaving the union, a matter which gravely concerned its leaders.<sup>47</sup> Yet the core of this party was strong, a point that was emphasised by Huw T. Edwards during the 1930s. Their ability to attract Cyril Jones to stand as their candidate in 1929 is testimony to the steady progress they were making. Elsewhere Labour's prospects were not as promising. Rural Wales's initial dalliance with the party was waning. Its' limited appetite for radical, socialist, politics was in decline. Even in constituencies where the party had established a fair following, interest was falling. Indicative of this general mood, Huw Cernyw Williams wrote to the Merioneth MP, H. H. Jones, in April 1929 describing a recent Labour meeting in Corwen:

'I attended a Labour meeting here last week...The audience was large, but the majority were Liberals and Tories. There was no enthusiasm, dull in the extreme and all left – en masse - before the usual vote of thanks.'<sup>48</sup>

A few days later the clerk of Deudraeth rural district council, John Jones, wrote to Haydn Jones confirming Labour's unpopularity in the division:

'...a Labour meeting was arranged at Croesor lately...The speaker turned up in time, and had an audience of two – Bob Owen [quarry clerk] and another chap who is not a particularly good asset to any party. They had a smoke and went home.'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> County Herald, 17 April 1926.

<sup>48</sup> H. C. Williams to H. H. Jones, 5 April 1929, H .H. Jones MS, fo222, NLW.

A similar picture was emerging in Montgomeryshire. The county council elections of 1925 and 1928 dealt the divisional party a major blow. Having performed reasonably well in the contests following the Great War (in 1919 six Labour candidates had been elected) by the late 1920s their numbers were dwindling. By 1925 they only had two representatives on the council. Following the 1928 contest even those seats were lost.<sup>51</sup> The party was the subject of much derision in the local press. Whilst the *Montgomeryshire Express* failed to give the party any exposure, the *Montgomeryshire County Times* was particularly scathing. When the party announced the candidacy of Jack Evans in 1926, the paper gave him a very hostile reception. The editorial questioned his suitability to represent a rural constituency. Emanating from a mining background, his strategy of visiting the division's farming communities was ridiculed.<sup>52</sup> It implied that he could not appreciate the problems facing the industry which underpinned the constituency's economy. Moreover it stressed the inappropriate nature of urban and industrial Labour as a party of rural Wales, an argument advanced by Liberals and Conservatives alike during this period.

### *The Conservative Party, 1927-8*

Whilst the Conservatives of North East Wales had made much progress during the early 1920s, this was not sustained throughout the ensuing decade. The main stumbling block, which prevented most constituency parties from trying to forge ahead, was their lack of financial resources. Like their political opponents in the region, they battled to keep their accounts balanced. Indeed the Flintshire Conservative Association was the only one which did not have concerns of this nature.

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<sup>49</sup> John Jones to H. H. Jones, 1 April 1929, H .H. Jones MS, fo241, NLW.

<sup>50</sup> John Jones to H. H. Jones, 1 April 1929, H .H. Jones MS, fo241, NLW.

<sup>51</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 10 March 1928.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 17 April 1926.

For the embryonic Montgomeryshire party, money was a problem which dogged them almost from the outset. Having only been re-established in 1925, by April 1927 it was reported that they had already accrued a deficit in excess of £145, in part because some of their most generous benefactors had died with no prospect of finding alternative sources of funds.<sup>53</sup> Echoing the concerns of the division's Liberal party, they too were over reliant on the contributions of a small number of people. It was revealed in 1928 that the bulk of their money, around £278, had come from only 25 individuals.<sup>54</sup> Moreover a similar situation prevailed in the Wrexham party. Having been dealt a 'nasty knock' in the 1928 county council elections, the party treasurer, G. A. S. Mowat, urged activists to be more cautious in their approach to future local elections. They could barely afford to contest any. Between April 1927 and April 1928 they had spent nearly £650, and had acquired an overdraft of over £192.<sup>55</sup> He warned that the next eighteen months would be a 'crucial time' for them. Financial matters also featured in the deliberations of the Denbigh Conservatives. However, their money worries were self-inflicted. In 1926 the party spent in excess of £900 on a house in Colwyn Bay that was to become their new offices. It soon transpired that they could not afford such a purchase alongside other annual expenses. The following year they struggled to raise the £500 needed to pay their agent.<sup>56</sup>

Yet in contrast to the financial concerns of the Montgomeryshire and Wrexham associations, the Denbigh Tories did not regard their problems as being long-term. They remained more optimistic about their future prospects. Following their reorganisation in 1925 their new agent, Sidney Smith, was even more confident of their future potential.

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<sup>53</sup> Montgomeryshire County Times, 28 April 1927.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 7 October 1928.

<sup>55</sup> Wrexham Leader, 27 April 1928.

<sup>56</sup> Denbigh Division Conservative Association minutes, 12 April 1926, DD/DM/80/2, DRO.

Their membership figures continued increasing in both the northern and southern area associations and their women's section was going from strength to strength.

Whilst financial management was not the most notable strength of the region's Conservative party, extending their appeal to newly enfranchised female voters was an area they enjoyed greater success – in keeping with the line of the national party. In recent years historians such as Martin Pugh and David Jarvis have examined the appeal of Conservatism to women and the party's desire to attract female voters, arguing that this was the key to Conservative success. Following the restructuring of its machinery in 1918 the party adopted the principle that women would constitute one third of its representatives at all levels. Nonetheless for many years prior to this more women had been closely linked with the party through groups such as the Primrose League and the Tariff Reform League. As a consequence the transition from female association to full membership was a comparatively smooth process, which was reflected in the rapid growth of their numbers.<sup>57</sup> By 1928 one million women had joined the Conservatives ranks. Their numbers far exceeded the female membership of either the Liberals or Labour party organisations. Furthermore, unlike Labour which was determined not to divide the party along gender lines, from 1924 onwards the Tories sought to introduce policies specifically designed to target female voters. It is unlikely that such a stance was borne out of a desire to promote equality. In general the Conservatives had little time for the equal rights feminism of organisations such as the Six Point Group and were slow to incorporate parts of NUSEC's programme into their national manifestos. Rather they sought to preserve the 'traditional' domestic role of women as wives and mothers.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Martin Pugh, Women and the women's movement, 1914-1999, London, 2000, p.125.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p.127.

Despite the fact that it was a Conservative administration that put the Equal Franchise Act on the statute book in 1928, David Jarvis argues that the need to win female support was rooted in an intrinsic chauvinistic fear. He writes:

‘Although the prospect and subsequent arrival of female suffrage prompted many Tories to lament the uncertainty of future politics, there was remarkable agreement within the party about the existence of a specifically female political agenda.’<sup>59</sup>

Following the Representation of the People Act in 1918, women constituted 40 per cent of the electorate. Thus the party was aware that if they were to retain their position they had to appeal to females. Yet the fact that the political allegiances of women were untested caused great anguish for party leaders. Prejudices about their capability to comprehend political matters were rife. Similar fears were articulated in the Tory press in 1928, when the so-called ‘flapper’ vote became a reality. This legislation meant that women now constituted 52 per cent of British voters. However the party persisted in their campaign to win over the hearts and minds of women, this time appealing to those in the 21 and 30 age group. Psephological analysis has confirmed that they were successful in these endeavours.<sup>60</sup>

Generally speaking, in North East Wales women’s sections enjoyed a fair degree of success. Within the constituency parties, women were encouraged to be responsible for the arrangement and management of social functions and fund-raising activities. Seemingly

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<sup>59</sup> David Jarvis, ‘The Conservative party and the politics of gender, 1900-1939’ in M. Francis & I. Zweiniger-Barglewska (eds), *op. cit.*, p.173.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Pugh, ‘Popular Conservatism in Britain: Continuity and change, 1880-1987’, *Journal of British Studies*, vol 27, 1988, p.255.

they accepted their 'traditional' feminine role in the party. Yet the motives of Central Office in encouraging these activities were not simply to improve party organisation. In many respects this was a by-product of a more cynical strategy. Divisional and local associations were left in no doubt as to the determination of Central Office to entice greater female participation. A circular letter sent by the Flintshire agent, Isaac Edwards, to the Maelor area Conservatives illustrates this point. Noting that the Flintshire electorate was to be increased by 7000 young female voters at the next election he said:

'...it is of the utmost importance that steps should be taken to bring these potential voters within the scope of our organisation. To delay consideration of the problem will be dangerous, and, therefore, I beg that you call, at the earliest possible moment, a meeting of your Committee with the view to formulating some plans for discussing the names and addresses of those women who will shortly come upon the register.'<sup>61</sup>

Without the minutes of the Maelor Conservatives it is difficult to ascertain how the association responded to their agent's command. However the Flintshire Conservatives placed great emphasis on the need to attract more women into the party. In this respect they were successful. In March 1928 Isaac Edwards congratulated them on their achievements.<sup>62</sup> Female involvement in politics was not only a matter of high priority for the Flintshire Conservatives. In the Denbigh division party leaders were keen to draft in the services of a professional female canvasser for the summer 1927. She was to be based at the Colwyn Bay office, and her chief duty was to encourage greater female activity in the

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<sup>61</sup> I. Edwards to Major Hugh Peel [Maelor Conservative Chairman], 29 February 1928, Bryn-y-Pys MS, D/BP/1018/1.

<sup>62</sup> County Herald, 2 March 1928.

division.<sup>63</sup> Moreover the head of their Women's Organisation, Mrs Patterson, had written to the division's executive committee expressing the need for additional resources to improve propaganda work. Whilst it later transpired that the party could not afford the fees of a canvasser, it was agreed in April 1928 that an appropriately trained Welsh speaking woman should be appointed as their organiser.<sup>64</sup> Whilst this was indicative of an *organisational* response, it does not show that gender was placed at the heart of the party's electoral appeal.

### The 1929 Election

The nature of the 1929 election differed considerably to previous contests. All three parties had devoted time and energy to consolidating and broadening their appeal. They understood the necessity of expanding their electoral base. Yet this remained an inherently 'Liberal' region. Despite the significant breakthroughs made by the Conservatives and Labour in 1924 their position was not guaranteed. Following the Liberal party's disappointment in 1924, both on a local and national level, they had refused to concede defeat. A resurgence in Liberal activity between 1925 and 1929 had surpassed the efforts of their political rivals in some divisions. In many respects they were playing them at their own game. Thus, if the period between 1918 and 1924 had illustrated what could be achieved through hard work, organisation and perseverance, the late 1920s demonstrated what could be achieved if the party most closely allied to the constituency's cultural character applied itself to cultivating its grassroots supporters. In the case of three out of the four constituencies in North East Wales this was the Liberal party. The exception was Wrexham, as it was undergoing a period of transition and becoming unfavourable Liberal ground.

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<sup>63</sup> Denbigh Division Conservative Association minutes, 6 April 1927.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 23 April 1928.



Significantly Labour's campaign in the Wrexham division in 1929, according to press reports, was a rather subdued and lacklustre affair. A handful of public meetings were convened, with the highlight being J. H. Thomas' visit to Rhos. Nonetheless Robert Richards was always regarded as the front runner by the press. Both the *Wrexham Leader* and *Wrexham and North Wales Guardian* grudgingly acknowledged this fact. In the first instance, the presence of a Tory candidate divided the anti-socialist vote. The Liberals were thus severely weakened. Secondly Labour's close involvement with the community during the previous years confirmed their progressive credentials. In contrast to the other parties they had illustrated, through their actions, the way in which reforming ideals could be applied to the local community. The impact made by Labour during these years is best reflected in the voting statistics themselves. It was they who were the greatest beneficiaries of a large growth in the division's electorate.<sup>65</sup> They gained their highest vote ever in 1929, exceeding even the Liberals' support in the 1924 contest. The Wrexham Labour party could be justifiably proud of their performance. Yet it was not surprising if national trends are considered. The 1929 election was the high watermark of Labour success during the interwar period. As Duncan Tanner argues, the 1929 contest enabled the party to consolidate its hold over 'core' supporters, whilst at the same time attracting a more diverse electoral base.<sup>66</sup> In Wrexham, as elsewhere, their victory was not merely the result of class and occupational voting. Labour's appeal now transcended the mining districts. By this time the party had established its credentials and proved its 'respectability'. The party's approach to the economy, health, education and housing helped Labour to assemble

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<sup>65</sup> Between 1924 and 1929 the Wrexham constituency increased from 41,686 to 52,310 electors.

<sup>66</sup> Duncan Tanner, 'Class voting and radical politics: the Liberal and Labour parties, 1910-1931' in J. Lawrence & M. Taylor (eds), *Party, State and Society – Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820*, Cambridge 1997, p.120.

a broader appeal. Moreover Labour also benefited from the growth of more working class council estates.<sup>67</sup>

Nonetheless, the party failed to capture any other seats in North East Wales. Their performance in Montgomeryshire was disappointing, but not unexpected. Jack Evans was very much regarded as the outsider in the contest. He failed to make a lasting impression with his campaign. Only in the more urban areas of the constituency, like Newtown, could he be confident of supporters attending Labour meetings. The only press coverage he received was negative, focusing on his perceived ignorance of agricultural matters. He polled only 15 per cent of the vote. Nonetheless unlike other constituencies there was little 'potential' in this seat for Labour to build upon. It had been represented by a Liberal for many decades and was an inherently conservative division. It would take a good deal to break these habits, and a weak party that did not promote a strong agricultural policy was unlikely to win through.

Conversely Labour had high hopes for Flintshire. Since 1918 the party's support had been steadily rising. Indeed evaluating their prospects in November 1928, the *Manchester Guardian* speculated that the reason the Liberals had lost their grip over the constituency in 1924 was due to Labour's popularity.<sup>68</sup> The seat's occupational diversity did not enable the party to making a sweeping entrance onto the political stage. Nonetheless Labour's gradual rise meant 1929 presented at least an opportunity to consolidate their support. In 1929 Cyril O. Jones, one of the most respected figures in the North Wales movement, represented their cause. According to the *County Herald* he led a dynamic and successful

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<sup>67</sup> D. M. Tanner, 'The Labour party and electoral politics in the coalfields', in A. Campbell; N. Fishman & D. Howell, *op. cit.*, p.84.

<sup>68</sup> The article which was featured in the Manchester Guardian also appeared in the 11 November 1928 edition of the County Herald.

campaign. His agenda did not merely centre around national policies. Whilst he emphasised the party's commitment to social and industrial reform, he illustrated the way in which these ideals could be applied on a local level. For example in March 1929 he offered possible solutions to reduce the county's unemployment figures, including developing parts of the River Dee so that more local jobs could be created.<sup>69</sup> Jones was unsuccessful in his bid to win Flintshire. Labour came in as the third party. He was beaten by his brother, Frederick, who was the Liberal candidate. Nonetheless Labour was closing on the Conservatives and the Liberals. The party gained nearly five thousand more votes than in 1924 and won an additional three per cent of the poll. Yet whilst the Liberals were perceived as the party of the 'left', Labour found it difficult to make a decisive break. Labour had some years to go before it gained major party status in Flintshire.

The 1929 contest proved to be difficult for the Conservatives. They were in the unusual position, as Edmund Bushby reminded them at a North Wales delegate meeting, of both 'attacking' and 'defending' their interests.<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless as chairman of the North Wales Unionists, in addition to being Wrexham's candidate, Bushby was confident of the party's prospects. The Tories had good reason to be optimistic. They had worked consistently to improve their organisation and attract new support throughout the 1920s. In 1924 they had reaped the rewards of their labours. It is understandable that their expectations were high in 1929. Although they had experienced some difficulties, their problems had not been insurmountable. Moreover whilst the Wrexham association demonstrated that it was not totally in tune with the needs of the working classes, by ignoring the General Strike, its strategy of targeting more females to its ranks, had been successful. In this sense then the

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<sup>69</sup> County Herald, 1 March 1929.

<sup>70</sup> Wrexham and North Wales Guardian, 30 January 1929.

regional party's eventual disappointment following the contest could not have been prevented. The circumstances were out of their control.

Essentially the 1929 contest afforded the Liberals the opportunity to demonstrate the depth of their support in the region. Their performance illustrates the extent to which their values continued to permeate local communities, and were embedded in the region's cultural identity. But their renewed vigour was also attracting new support as well. This was certainly the case in Flintshire. The incumbent MP, Goodman Roberts, led an exhaustive and well-orchestrated campaign. The electoral statistics reveal that his support remained fairly consistent. The number of votes remained at a similar level to 1924.<sup>71</sup> However the constituency itself had grown in demographic terms. The result illustrates that the Liberals were still the dominant force in this constituency.

The same was true in Denbigh. Efforts had been made to streamline the party and target new voters, whilst their candidate, Ann Brodrick, had become a well-known figure in the area. The mere fact that the party was willing to put forward a female candidate for election was unusual. Whilst the national party promoted greater female involvement in politics, few were adopted as candidates. Nonetheless Brodrick's predecessor, David Rhys, had shown that masculinity and linguistic ability (Welsh) was not enough to capture this seat. The Conservatives relied on personal appeals to thwart the Liberals. They were convinced that Ellis Davies was not a popular figure in the constituency and neither was the land policy that he promoted. Thus part of their strategy had been to convince disillusioned Liberals that ideologically little separated them and the Conservatives. In a

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<sup>71</sup> In 1924 the Conservatives won 19,054 votes whilst in 1929 they acquired 19,536.

meeting held at Nant Clwyd Hall in June 1928, the *Denbighshire Free Press* captured the essence of Mrs. Brodrick's speech:

'The advanced Liberal and the progressive Conservative had now practically touched each other, but it was obvious that Liberalism standing alone, could not carry sufficient weight to do anything in Parliament. Therefore the electors had to choose between the Conservative and the Socialist parties.'<sup>72</sup>

Yet their strategy was dealt a serious set-back in early 1929 when Ann Brodrick withdrew her candidacy following a series of personal misfortunes, which were to end in her death shortly before polling day. Her departure from the party had far reaching implications. At short notice a local man, Major A. C. Graham, was drafted in as her replacement. He was unable to establish the personal following that Brodrick had commanded and as a consequence he faced a very difficult contest. By this time the Liberals also had a new candidate. Following the retirement of Ellis Davies, Henry Morris-Jones had been selected as their representative. He was a shrewd politician and his Liberal credentials were undisputed. Moreover in contrast to Major Graham he was a Welsh speaker and a nonconformist, attributes that 'Celt' in the *Daily Post* still believed were vital to gain support in rural Wales.<sup>73</sup>

Although the Conservatives did manage to win the endorsement of the National Farmers Union (their county chairman, Edward Griffiths, was a prominent Tory activist) their campaign was generally unsuccessful. Despite placing great emphasis on agricultural matters, Graham failed to impress the farming community. Moreover, a week prior to polling day a rumour emerged in the press about his attitude to the Welsh language. It was

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<sup>72</sup> *Denbighshire Free Press*, 2 June 1928.

<sup>73</sup> *Liverpool Daily Post*, 20 May 1929.

alleged that he had little regard for Welsh speakers, and refused to employ even domestic staff at his home if they spoke the language.<sup>74</sup> These allegations were immediately and emphatically denied by Graham, and were accompanied by a pledge to learn Welsh if he was elected. Such allegations would have damaged Graham's credibility in this very 'Welsh' constituency. Yet whilst it may have alienated a few potential voters, this probably did little to alter the result of the contest. The level of support the Conservatives received remained consistent, however the increase in the electorate meant that the Liberals gained nearly 10,000 more votes. So in the two North Wales constituencies which the Tories had their best chance of winning, Denbigh and Flintshire, they were thwarted by the Liberal party.

The situation was different in Wrexham and Montgomeryshire. Both associations battled with their financial difficulties to conduct a strong campaign in 1929. Even though the Wrexham party was aware that it did not have a realistic hope of capturing the seat, their withdrawal in 1924 had been badly received by their activists. Essentially the association risked the wrath of their supporters and Central Office if they did not put up a candidate. Yet whilst Bushby led a low key campaign, focusing on national issues, he failed to acknowledge his constituency's needs and devoted little time to discussing the problem of unemployment. Conversely, in Montgomeryshire the Conservatives' performance took many by surprise. Despite the *Montgomeryshire County Times*' assertion that they were a strong force in the division, the sustained nature of Liberal support meant that in reality they only stood a slim chance of success. Nonetheless the resignation of David Davies as MP improved their prospects. The Conservative candidate, J. Murray Naylor, stood a far better chance of success against Clement Davies. Both were local men and unknown

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<sup>74</sup> Denbighshire Free Press, 1 June 1929.

quantities when it came to parliamentary politics. Significantly, though, little separated their views on issues like social reform and free trade. Although both focused on their parties' national manifesto pledges, in ideological terms they shared much common ground. This was reflected in the result of the election. In this supposed 'safe' Liberal seat Clement Davies only enjoyed a majority of 7.8 per cent over Naylor, which translated into just over 2000 votes.

### Conclusion

The results of the 1929 contest in North East Wales shows that neither the Conservatives nor Labour made the breakthrough they desired. Despite the fact that they had continued to work consistently towards this goal they had not considered, or predicted, the extent to which the Liberal resurgence would have affected their position. They had not appreciated the strength of the Liberal party, and their ability to alter their course and strategy between 1924 and 1929. In effect the 1929 election heralded the first modern contest in this region, where all three of the main parties adopted national as opposed to local strategies. They benefited from the assistance offered by their respective headquarters. A new breed of politician was also emerging. No longer was politics the domain of the wealthy or regarded as a part time profession. It was attracting motivated and principled individuals who wanted to make an impression. Politics was a serious business, a fact reflected by an increased desire for greater professionalism and dedication. Yet if Labour and the Conservatives were to truly to achieve their goal the next step had to be exorcising the region's affinity with the Liberal party – which would prove to be a difficult task.

## *Chapter 6*

### *The demise of Liberalism*

The result of the 1929 election dashed the hopes of Liberals nationwide. During the preceding years they had invested much time, energy and resources in attempting to revive their flagging support and turn the party, once more, into a credible political force capable of governing the country. Whilst they were never serious contenders to form the next administration, they stood a good chance of holding the balance of power. Nonetheless, although a minority Labour government was ushered into office, the Liberals failed to win enough seats to establish an imposing parliamentary presence. They won a further 19 seats, which meant the party still had less than 60 MPs in total. In recent years much has been written about the significance of the 1929 election. This was the Liberals last serious attempt to retain its position in British politics for this period. Their inability to cross the 80 seat threshold has been viewed by some commentators as confirmation of their collapse in Westminster.<sup>1</sup> Officially the party's response to this disappointing result was both philosophical and upbeat. In their literature and in the speeches of prominent members it was depicted as a positive development. They asserted that their performance should be viewed in a broader context, as part of their gradual return to power. Encapsulating this spirit the National Liberal Federation's 1929 report recorded Lloyd George's sentiments:

'There had been considerable changes in the political situation since the last annual meeting of the Federation, and the changes were all for the better so far as the Liberal Party was concerned. At this time they were a small and very divided group

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Williamson, National Crisis and National Government: British politics, the economy and Empire, 1926-1932, Cambridge, 1992, pp.22-34.



in the House of Commons, and their votes were of no account...Now Liberals voted together, and meant to continue to do so. It was true that in some respects the result of the last election was disappointing, but whether Liberals pulled a long face or wore a broad smile depended upon the mirror they looked into.

If they looked into the mirror of the Tory or Socialist Press they would pull a long face, but if they look into the mirror of facts they would find a broad smile.’<sup>2</sup>

Despite the public reassurances, though, Liberal officials were troubled that the party had not realised its full potential. To a large extent this was true. The policy initiatives they developed during the late 1920s had been forward thinking and progressive in their nature. *We can conquer unemployment* had been warmly received in political and intellectual circles. Yet if some Liberals themselves failed to fully appreciate the merits of these new policies, the electorate had little chance of grasping their full significance. It is not known whether the enormity of this problem was comprehended at the time. However, rather than tackling the issue of policy head on after the 1929 defeat, organisational matters were examined instead. Party officials came to the conclusion that the key to their success was the continued streamlining of party machinery. As a result even greater attention was to be devoted to the organisation of constituency associations. In February 1930 Ramsay Muir was appointed chairman of the Liberal Organising Committee. It was hoped in the constituencies as much as London that this respected Liberal academic would revive party fortunes.<sup>3</sup> Upon his arrival in the post his first directive was to launch a new nationwide campaign to increase the membership of local Liberal associations.<sup>4</sup> In July 1929 he had written to Lloyd George of the responsibilities of central office:

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<sup>2</sup> National Liberal Federation, 46<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting, 1929, University of Bristol Archives.

<sup>3</sup> Wrexham Leader, 7 February 1930.

‘...a great deal of organisation work will have to be done throughout the country stimulated and guided by headquarters. The local associations must be stimulated to go on, and to make themselves self-supporting. Many of them are in good fettle, but they will soon collapse if they are not encouraged and helped. The district federations also must be got on to a sounder footing. They are an essential part of our organisation, but they have been too much merely the channels through which headquarters worked.’<sup>5</sup>

Muir recognised that one of the main reasons for the inactivity of some constituency parties was their mistaken belief ‘that there was an inexhaustive fund at headquarters’ which in the long term sapped the ‘vitality both of associations and federations’.<sup>6</sup> This point was certainly true when considering a constituency like Montgomeryshire. Even though its Liberal association had received no contributions from party headquarters since 1918, they had relied heavily on the generous contributions of David Davies. Between 1910 and 1929 he had donated a substantial sum of money. This guaranteed income had rendered all but the executive committee largely inactive. There was no pressure on them to arrange fundraising events or organise campaigns to increase their membership. Thus, the sense of urgency that was often associated with successful political endeavour was lacking, and it was this which Ramsay Muir wanted to restore. Muir had previously tried to restore policy to the Liberal party in 1923, in his own writings and through the Liberal Summer School. He had also successfully represented the party in Parliament, standing in Rochdale. Whilst he was narrowly defeated in 1924, his commitment to the Liberal cause was undoubted.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ramsay Muir to Lloyd George, 23 July 1929, Lloyd George MS, G 15 6 12, HLRO.

In the aftermath of the 1929 contest Muir set about evaluating the strength of the party in the country. The results of his findings make interesting, if not unsurprising, reading. Recording his results in a memorandum to Herbert Samuel in May 1930, marked 'most private and confidential', he outlined the situation as he perceived it. Muir looked at the past performance and prospects of every constituency party. Summarising his findings he divided each association into categories ranging from A to E, 'A' being the seats that they were most likely to win and 'E' the ones they would not contest or where their deposits had been forfeited.<sup>7</sup> He concluded that there were no more than 300 seats in the country that were actually worth contesting. Invariably such findings would have depressed party members. Even during the gloomy days of the early 1920s they had never fielded fewer than 340 candidates. Moreover, in 1929 in excess of 500 Liberal candidates had stood for Parliament. Yet according to Muir's research this had been a costly business for HQ. The election had cost headquarters over £254,000, due to the fact that so many constituency parties were unable to finance candidates themselves.<sup>8</sup> This was a figure that had to be reduced. Associations needed to be inspired and motivated.

However this was no easy task as morale was at a low ebb in party headquarters. The Abingdon Street office experienced difficulty in offering firm and decisive leadership due to the lack of cohesion within the party in London. This was a long standing problem. In a memorandum to the party's organising committee in 1925 Lloyd George had written:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ramsay Muir to Herbert Samuel, 8 May 1930, Herbert Samuel MS, A/73/17, HLRO. The categories are as follows, along with the number of constituencies who fall into the category: (A) Most likely to win – 121 seats. (B) Possible wins – 66 seats. (C) Constituencies where the party has been successful enough to justify a candidate – 113 seats. (D) Constituencies where the party has no chance of winning. (E) Constituencies they will not contest, or where deposits have been forfeited.

‘Is the organisation to be run with a single eye to the revival and regeneration of Liberalism, or is it to be controlled with a view to ensuring the predominance of any single section of the party?...If it is organised from one side, you may depend upon it there will be a counter organisation on the other, and when Mr. Asquith returns to the House of Commons, he will find himself not the Head of a united party, but the Chief of a small body, hopelessly divided into two consolidated and entrenched factions, firing innuendoes and communiqués at each other.’<sup>9</sup>

One of the most divisive issues in party circles during the latter 1920s was the existence of the Lloyd George Political Fund. The speculation and suspicion surrounding its distribution had fuelled much animosity on both sides. Lloyd George asserted that he had never agreed to pool resources with the Asquithian camp following the party’s reunion in 1922. He was resentful that his fund’s contribution to the election campaigns of 1922 and 1923 had far exceeded payments from Asquithian supporters. In a memorandum sent to the party’s Abingdon Street headquarters around 1924, he complained of the financial burdens and expectations placed upon him.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, though, the Asquithian faction were aggrieved that Lloyd George refused to make his fund accessible to the party as a whole, as its financial situation was so precarious. The controversy surrounding the fund, and the impact of the General Strike, essentially prevented the party from becoming a truly unified and cohesive body after 1922.

By the late 1920s rival groups and cliques had emerged which facilitated the growth of a culture of suspicion and intrigue. This was accompanied by divisions over Liberal values

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Lloyd George to Liberal Organisation Committee, Memorandum, January 1925, A. J. Sylvester MS, B20, NLW.

<sup>10</sup> Lloyd George to Abingdon Street Office, Memorandum, c.1924, A. J. Sylvester MS, B12, NLW.

and principles. One of the most prominent internal factions was the Liberal Council. Established in 1927, and chaired by Lord Grey, it united former Asquithian supporters who had become frustrated with Lloyd George's dominance. Although not a particularly powerful body in a national context, within the political circles of London it did exert some influence. They persistently questioned the power and control which Lloyd George exerted over the party. Indeed the extent to which his personal fund was used to finance projects and candidates was a source of great concern to them. Following the 1929 election, Council members insinuated that the existence of the Lloyd George fund had weakened the party machine. It was regarded as a 'handicap'. In the Liberal Council's journal Lord Grey amplified these sentiments:

'There are large numbers of Liberals who have given devoted service to Liberal ideals, who will not remain within the Party on such terms, and the majority of them would have left the Party long ago had it not been that the Liberal Council has provided for them a rallying ground where they can retain their independence and continue to work for Liberalism.'<sup>11</sup>

Lord Grey's article caused great controversy within Liberal circles. Following its appearance in the *Liberal Council Notes* a deputation was sent from party headquarters to try and appease the Council.<sup>12</sup> Significantly the tone of their later publications was not as inflammatory. Nevertheless the stance adopted by the Liberal Council exemplifies the point that the party was not unified. Whilst this lack of cohesion was probably the most serious problem facing the party, it was not the only one. Although in London the party was groping for direction, in the constituencies they were faced with another set back.

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<sup>11</sup> Lord Grey, 'The Lloyd George Fund and the Leadership' *Liberal Council Notes*, Issue 2, February 1930. Bristol University Archives.

Muir's plans to ensure the greater efficiency of the divisional associations was threatened by a shortage of qualified agents. As early as 1927 the *Liberal Agent* had alerted the party to the fact that not enough agents were coming up through the ranks. In 1927 the number of Liberal agents amounted to less than 200 nationwide, with Wales having only 12 of these.<sup>13</sup> Thus in the aftermath of the 1929 election the party had little to feel positive about.

### *Decline and disillusionment in North East Wales, 1929-1931*

In North Wales the situation was not quite as bleak. Here rank and file Liberals were far removed from the gloom of party headquarters. Yet there were early signs that pessimism could grow if local associations were neglected. In 1930 Einion Evans, the leader of the North Wales Young Liberals, complained to E. Morgan Humphries that the parliamentary party was letting down its grassroots supporters. In his opinion enthusiasm for the party still seemed strong. However he wanted to see greater efforts made to preserve this spirit from Liberal central office. He said:

‘Ag ystyried sefyllfa’r Blaid yn y Senedd, y mae dyn bron a roddi gorau i’r cwbl. Ac eto, pan af o gwmpas y wlad a gweled brwdfrydedd y bobl ieuainc, y mae calon dyn yn codi o’r gwaelodion, a deuaf gartref gan deimlo fod dyfodol i’r Blaid. Os bydd farw, ar yr arweinwyr y gorffwys y bai.’<sup>14</sup>

Evans' observation certainly rings true with regard to North East Wales. Constituency parties in general remained enthused about the Liberal cause. At a local level very little had

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<sup>12</sup> Liberal Council Minutes, 10 April 1930, Bristol University Archives.

<sup>13</sup> ‘A few facts about the shortage of agents’, *Liberal Agent*, Issue 124, 1927.

<sup>14</sup> Einion Evans to E. Morgan Humphries, 8 April 1930, E. M. Humphries MS, A/1064, NLW. ‘When considering the Party’s situation in Parliament one loses heart. Yet on my travels, when I visit different parts of the country and see the enthusiasm of young people, one’s despair lifts, and I realise that the party has a future. If the party dies the blame will rest with its leader’. (My translation).

changed since 1929. Only in Wrexham had the party been disappointed, and even here the recapturing of Flintshire had compensated for this defeat. Significantly this optimism was not always shared by the chosen parliamentary representatives. This was exemplified in Montgomeryshire. Despite Clement Davies' desire to strengthen the party's infrastructure on a constituency level, the greater his parliamentary experience the more he became disillusioned with the national party. This despondency had set in early for the newly elected MP. By mid 1930 Clement Davies was becoming increasingly frustrated with his new career. He despaired at the condition of the Liberal party, and had been angered with its leadership. For many years Davies had been an admirer of Lloyd George. He made no secret of the fact that he would follow his lead – unlike his predecessor. However during the year following his entry to Parliament he quickly appreciated the untenable position of the Liberal party and the insincerity (to his mind) of the party's leaders.

Following the election Davies quickly rose to prominence at Westminster. He was enlisted by Lloyd George to draft the Liberal amendment to the Coal Mines Bill in December 1929. This was a big responsibility for him. Nonetheless it showed both to his constituency and the national party that he was held in high regard. Although the work meant that constituency duties suffered, his association were extremely accommodating. In early 1930 his divisional party expressed their delight that their new member has been given such a prominent role. In February 1930 T. Hughes Jones proudly spoke of his labours at a meeting of the Montgomeryshire Liberals:

‘We did not send up a member to swell the ranks of somnolent Conservatism or the

disaffected ranks of Socialism but one who has taken his place worthily among what the Liberal leader has aptly termed the “the gate-keepers of legislation”.’<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless by March 1930 the situation had changed. The Coal Bill had become a divisive issue within the Liberal party, and thus for the sake of party unity Lloyd George halted his party’s opposition to it. Clement Davies’ work had been in vain. Moreover Liberal MP’s were urged not to vote against the measure.<sup>16</sup> In Lloyd George’s defence he foresaw the threat to Liberalism if the government was defeated, forcing another election that could further weaken his party. This development was a major turning point in Davies’ relationship with the party. Six months after the event he gave the following interview to the *Montgomeryshire Express* recalling his experiences:

‘It was perfectly scandalous. I was absolutely let down and chucked overboard after I had rowed the boat within sight of the winning post. I had made mincemeat of this wretched Coal Bill – the Government were on the verge of collapse; then came the order ‘about turn’ and you know when father (Lloyd George) says turn, we all turn. Honestly I felt like a sucked orange after all the time I had wasted on this precious Bill. I think I should have done better had I stood still and refused to bend the knee – in the long run the rebel usually comes out on top, especially when he chooses the straight and narrow path. However, what’s the use of crying over spilt milk or roasting chestnuts for Lloyd George. So long as he runs the show we shall never do any good.’<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Montgomeryshire Liberal Association minutes, 22 February 1930, NLW.

<sup>16</sup> J. Graham Jones, ‘Montgomeryshire Politics: Clement Davies and the National Government’, *Montgomeryshire Collections*, 1985, vol 73, p.97.

<sup>17</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 2 September 1930.



This episode led Davies to join the Simonite Liberals in a somewhat surprising lurch to the 'right' of the party. Nonetheless this was only ever meant to be a temporary measure. In September 1930 he announced his intention to stand down at the next election. He had been invited by Lever Brothers to become their legal director, which meant he had to relinquish his parliamentary ties. His frustration with the party in the Commons was not the only reason why he felt the time was ripe to leave. When he was first elected he had not anticipated the heavy financial burden that would fall on him as the member for Montgomeryshire. Although it was clear that he did not have the ancestral wealth David Davies enjoyed, his constituency party were in desperate need of money following his predecessor's decision to curtail his contributions. Having given up a lucrative career at the bar, Clement Davies did not have the means to donate in excess of £300 per annum to the party's coffers. In March 1931 he complained to a meeting of the divisional party that he could not afford to give more than £120 due to his financial circumstances.<sup>18</sup> In June 1930 he wrote to the veteran Liberal politician Herbert Lewis. He painted a very bleak picture:

'I am sure that your thoughts are often with us in our struggle to maintain the spirit of Liberalism in the House; and I am sure you realise that the struggle is rather a difficult one. The position in the House is well nigh hopeless. The Government is weak and more Conservative in its attitude than even the conservatives would dare be even if they were in power. We are allowed to criticise but not allowed to vote. If we object to a measure as being anti-Liberal we are allowed to storm and rage but when the moment comes to vote we are told that the Government must not be turned out into the yard. I feel that the Party as a Party is dead. There is neither health nor spirit in us. We are just as useless as loud sounding brass. How long

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 3 March 1931.

this Parliament will continue I do not know, but when the time comes for us to go to the country we will go without a policy and without a Party, and the result will be that less than a handful will come back next time. I wish we could see once again a bold policy and a spirit which would refuse to be conquered. Until we have these, the Liberals in the country, and those Liberals like yourself who knew the times of old, must look with despair at our petty-fogging comings and goings which lead no where.<sup>19</sup>

The disillusionment felt by Davies was yet to permeate the Liberal ranks of Montgomeryshire. Whilst he possessed both a local and national perspective, the divisional association was extremely parochial in its outlook. Since the departure of David Davies it had become a livelier and more energetic force, which was widely attributed to the influence of their new MP.<sup>20</sup> Following his election he was keen to alter the party's infrastructure, to put it on a sounder footing. His intention was to establish a stronger economic base and develop a scheme that would ensure better co-ordination amongst local parties.<sup>21</sup> The association's new agent, William Morris Lewis, supported Clement Davies' vision and by the end of January 1930 the necessary organisational changes had been implemented. A finance committee was established, and to ensure greater efficiency the county association devolved some of its powers to seven newly formed regional committees.<sup>22</sup> Indeed by 1931 the party was able to boast the existence of 48 associations in the division, with 42 of these functioning.<sup>23</sup> Thus the party's increased activity, despite the imminent departure of their member and the need to raise more funds, proved to be a very positive force. In this sense it vindicated Ramsay Muir's assumption, in 1929, that the

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<sup>19</sup> Clement Davies to J. Herbert Lewis, 3 June 1930, J. H. Lewis MS, D93 15, NLW.

<sup>20</sup> Montgomeryshire Express, 3 December 1929.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 January 1930.

self-sufficiency of a party ensured its vitality in the long term. Moreover Clement Davies' desire to be part of a fighting and independent party in Parliament was itself consistent with Muir's desire to defend Liberal policies and ideas rather than utilise electoral pacts as a means of sustaining Liberalism.

The Montgomeryshire Liberals were by no means exceptional in their desire to improve organisation at this time. Neither was the dichotomy that existed between the disillusionment of their Liberal Member of Parliament and the enthusiasm of activists. Frequently local party members did not discuss matters of ideological importance which affected the fabric of the national party. Whilst the party remained officially 'unified', grassroots supporters were more concerned with the practicalities of arranging social events to raise the Liberals' profile.

Other MPs were also disillusioned. Henry Morris-Jones, who represented the Denbigh division, was already weary of his party's impotence in the Commons by the end of 1929. Indeed, by March 1931 he wrote to Haydn Jones revealing that he was contemplating retiring.<sup>24</sup> Although he offered no reason he certainly echoed Clement Davies' sentiments when he wrote in his autobiography 'on every crucial point, and some of less importance, the Liberals were divided.'<sup>25</sup> Moreover he sensed that the party faced a fundamental problem, the root of which was that they were no longer an ideologically coherent body. Like Davies he also made the decision to join the band of Liberals led by Sir John Simon.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 3 March 1931.

<sup>24</sup> J. Henry Morris-Jones to H. Haydn Jones, 30 March 1931, H. H. Jones MS, fo. 295, NLW.

<sup>25</sup> J. H. Morris-Jones, Doctor in the Whip's Room, London 1955, p.83.

In the other constituencies of North East Wales divisional associations were spurred on, through the encouragement of party headquarters and their respective agents, to look to the future and expand their membership base. In Wrexham activists attempted to keep Liberal spirits buoyant. Their defeat at the hands of Labour in 1929 had been the source of great disappointment. Moreover the resignation of Christmas Williams as their candidate in August 1930 compounded their misery. Nevertheless in Flintshire and Denbigh party members were far more optimistic. The Liberal party had been victorious in both divisions in 1929. The prospects for the Flintshire party appeared to be extremely rosy. In September 1930 Thomas Waterhouse noted that through strict control of their finances they had managed to stay out of debt. He also proudly spoke of the party's unity on both a local and national level. It was his belief that they were the only party 'with a definite programme placed before the country'.<sup>26</sup>

In general the Liberal party had reached a difficult crossroads. Where the party's future lay was a matter which caused much debate and tension. Lloyd George's decision to co-operate with the Labour administration alienated those Liberals who were determined to maintain an independent identity for the party. This small group, led by Sir John Simon, were prepared to work with the Conservatives to remove the government. In March 1931 the authority of the Party was severely weakened when only 33 Liberal MPs supported a motion in favour of co-operating with the incumbent government. Moreover, the Party's strategic position was further complicated in July 1931 when Herbert Samuel took over the leadership following Lloyd George's illness.

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<sup>26</sup> Flintshire Liberal Association minutes, 18 September 1930. D/DM/350, FRO.

There is little doubt that it was the events leading up to the formation of the National Government which truly tore the party apart. These developments publicly exposed the rifts that had existed within the party for many years. The creation of a National Government was seen as the best option for the country, by the likes of Sir John Simon. The administration seemingly transcended party politics, and had the country's best interests at heart.<sup>27</sup> However, those who shared Lloyd George's views failed to comprehend how the sacrificing of intrinsic Liberal values, even momentarily - like Free Trade- could be in the national interest. MacDonald and his followers viewed the situation differently. They saw no other option to a National Government, and to the Tories this came to introducing tariffs to ensure the British economy was not undermined by cheap foreign imports, and that British industry was shielded slightly from the harsh economic climate. The National Government's decision to follow this protectionist course was no different to many other countries. Yet in Westminster these developments became part of a battle between pragmatism and principle.

In some cases old wounds were re-opened. Some divisional parties found it incredibly difficult to decide on their position. Moreover in constituencies like Denbigh and Flintshire chasms emerged between the wishes of the candidate and those of the constituency association. Many Liberals could not contemplate sacrificing their commitment to Free Trade and they feared that an alliance with the Tories might lead to this. It was, after all a central Tory party policy. However others were unable to accept the hard, radical, stance adopted by Lloyd George and his supporters. Indeed by March 1931 even the former

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<sup>27</sup> Philip Williamson, *op.cit*, pp.387-413.

premier's son-in-law, Goronwy Owen, was aggrieved with the course that was being taken.<sup>28</sup> He wrote to Haydn Jones:

'I agree with all you say about the Party. There is no doubt that we are following a suicidal policy but nothing seems to affect Ll. G. and 'Est. Fam. They seem blind and deaf to every sign and argument. Would that I were a free man to do as I like and as I think fit'.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover earlier that month Owen had written, '...everything in the Party is in turmoil all due to the childish behaviour of Ll. G. and Archie Sinclair'.<sup>30</sup> Yet many Liberal MP's had already if reluctantly recognised that the short-term introduction of tariffs was necessary given the financial crisis the country faced even *before* the election, and thus fell in behind Sir John Simon. Perhaps rendered 'realistic' by years in the wilderness and sensing an end of the old ideals, they accepted change (as they had done in 1916). Thus, the build-up to the 1931 election was to prove fateful for the Liberal party, and especially for the Liberals of North East Wales. Candidates received little help from the party's London headquarters. A few weeks prior to polling day Ramsay Muir pleaded with Lloyd George for greater financial assistance for Free Trade candidates. He feared for the party's future if the money was not forthcoming:

'I implore you to release as much of your fund as is possible for the assistance of candidates who stand as definite Free Traders. The present situation is that, met by a blank negative here, they turn to the Simon Office; and the result will be that the

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<sup>28</sup> Goronwy Owen was one of the four members of the 'Lloyd George Family Group' in Parliament. He represented the constituency of Caernarvon.

<sup>29</sup> Goronwy Owen to H. H. Jones, 30 March 1931, H. H. Jones MS, fo. 294, NLW.

<sup>30</sup> Goronwy Owen to H. H. Jones, 25 March 1931, H. H. Jones MS, fo. 292, NLW.

real Liberal Party will be reduced to a mere shadow, and reconstruction will be almost impossible...If you won't back us, that will mean a financial and irreparable breach between you and the bulk of the Party, I much fear; and I hate that this should happen. The situation is by no means desperate if we have some money...<sup>31</sup>

In many respects the 1931 contest heralded the beginning of the end for the Liberal party as a regional force in North East Wales. Their weaknesses and vulnerability were exposed. They allowed their political opponents to capitalise, as they had done during the early 1920's, on the vacuum of power that was emerging.

Table 6.1

Result of 1931 Election in North East Wales

| <i>Constituency</i>     | <i>Candidate</i>   | <i>Party</i> | <i>Number of votes</i> | <i>Percentage of vote</i> | <i>Majority</i> | <i>Turnout</i> |
|-------------------------|--------------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <i>Denbigh</i>          | J. H. Morris-Jones | Nat.Lib      | Unopposed              | -                         | -               | -              |
| <i>Flintshire</i>       | F. Llewellyn Jones | Nat.Lib      | 40405                  | 71.4                      | 42.8%           | 77.3%          |
|                         | Miss. F. Edwards   | Lab          | 16158                  | 28.6                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Montgomerys hire</i> | E. C. Davies       | Nat.Lib      | Unopposed              | -                         | -               | -              |
| <i>Wrexham</i>          | A. O. Roberts      | Nat.Lib      | 22474                  | 52.1                      | 4.2%            | 79.8%          |
|                         | R. Richards        | Lab          | 20653                  | 47.9                      | -               | -              |

Source: F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, Glasgow 1969.

Henry Morris-Jones never hid his support for the National Government. In his autobiography he reveals that he had been promoting the idea from January 1931.<sup>32</sup> Yet he did not reflect the prevailing view of his constituency party. In October 1931, following the

<sup>31</sup> Ramsay Muir to Lloyd George, 8 October 1931, A. J. Sylvester MS, B12, NLW.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p.85.

final meeting of the parliamentary Liberals as a united force Morris-Jones made the decision to follow John Simon, and pledge his support to the National Government. Considering the implications of this decision he later wrote:

‘Had I given more consideration to my own anchorage in Denbigh and to my future political tranquillity I should have joined the Samuelities or, better still, the Lloyd George group. I suffered for my decision for many years from the implacable hostility of Mr. Lloyd George whose constituency adjoined mine. His great prestige in the country, and particularly in Wales, and his command of every weapon of propaganda and influence, converted my seat from being the safest Liberal constituency in the kingdom into one of constant Party disunity and dissension. Further, it affected also, unfortunately, a close friendship between Mr. Lloyd George, and his family and myself which had existed for a long period, for the marked coolness shown by him and some of his family, and even relation by marriage, was a baffling source of regret to my wife and myself for many years.’<sup>33</sup>

His constituency party were deeply angered by his decision. It had always possessed strong radical inclinations. The prospect of Free Trade being sacrificed to resolve a short term financial crisis was unacceptable to the majority of its members. In the *Liverpool Daily Post*, ‘Celt’ speculated that many Liberal supporters would be very dismayed with Morris-Jones’ stance. In Colwyn Bay activists were deeply disappointed. Referring to the town’s demographic character and composition ‘Celt’ observed: ‘Colwyn Bay is the centre of the largest population, and to a certain extent it may be said to reflect Lancashire opinion’.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pp.87-88.

<sup>34</sup> *Liverpool Daily Post*, 15 October 1931.



However the *Denbighshire Free Press* noted that both the Denbigh and Ruthin Liberal associations had also expressed their condemnation of Morris-Jones' decision.<sup>35</sup>

The *Denbighshire Free Press* referred to the 1931 contest in Denbigh as the 'most tangled of general elections'.<sup>36</sup> Some called for the constituency's former MP, Ellis Davies, to be reinstated. Davies declined their invitation. He was unable to fight an energetic contest due to his fragile health. It was reluctantly decided that no other Liberal candidate would oppose Morris-Jones.<sup>37</sup> They realised that an unknown candidate would stand little hope against Morris-Jones who had such a popular local following.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless the party's frustrations were further compounded when the Conservatives lent their full support to his candidacy. The Labour party contemplated opposing him, but with no solid electoral base in the division they stood only a very slim chance of victory, especially at a time when their own party was in crisis. Moreover 'Celt' believed that many Welsh farmers had already been 'bitten by tariff enthusiasm' as their industry had been hit badly by the emergence of cheap foreign imports. Thus Morris-Jones was unopposed.<sup>39</sup>

In Flintshire the situation was even more volatile. Like their neighbours in Denbigh, the local Liberal associations had a long tradition of radicalism. In a meeting of the constituency party, Thomas Waterhouse stated:

'We have too many Whigs left in the Liberal party. We want a radical programme, and we want to go forward with courage. The great word 'Liberal' has been prostituted by men like Sir John Simon with their 'National Liberals'. The National

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<sup>35</sup> *Denbighshire Free Press*, 22 October 1931.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 17 October 1931.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*.

Liberals were out to destroy the Liberal party. Their intention at the next election was to secure Conservative votes. To-day we are fighting from within the party to Radicalise it'.<sup>40</sup>

He added:

'we want rid of all the Liberal National first, and all the Whiggish element afterwards, and the sooner they go the better.'<sup>41</sup>

Waterhouse refused to accept the introduction of tariffs. He wanted a strong, positive, radical, reforming programme. Thus he was unable to support Fred Llewellyn Jones' candidacy as Jones was prepared to accept the implementation of tariffs, and to contest Flintshire under the banner of the National Government. Justifying his stance Jones said 'however much I disagree...with the Tory party...it would be infinitely better for this country to have Beaverbrook and his policies applied than to have the policies of the Socialist applied'<sup>42</sup>. Yet despite his proven popularity with the electorate, party activists refused to support his moderated political views. Indeed Thomas Waterhouse referred to this address as the 'best Conservative speech I have listened to in my life'.<sup>43</sup> Their wildly differing outlooks on the crisis prevented them from standing side by side.

The divisional party's desire to ensure that their candidate was a committed free trader led it to dissolution in October 1931. They did not want to be associated with a Liberal candidate who did not share their intrinsic values. Consequently Fred Llewellyn Jones

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<sup>39</sup> Liverpool Daily Post, 19 October 1931.

<sup>40</sup> Flintshire Liberal Association minutes, 8 October 1931, D/DM/350, FRO.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Denbighshire Free Press, 17 October, 1931.

fought the 1931 contest with Conservative as opposed to Liberal support. Unlike Henry Morris-Jones he did not have a blind faith in the power of the National Government. Neither was he an ardent protectionist. For example he was unwilling to concede on the point of principle that food should be taxed. Like many other National Liberals he was simply reacting to the political climate and putting national concerns above partisan values. Replying to Waterhouse's attack he said:

'It is all very well to call me a Tory. I am to-day adopting a position which is being adopted by hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens. I am going to place nation before party.'<sup>44</sup>

The local press fully supported his stance, and criticised the attitude of his divisional party. He was regarded as a popular constituency MP, 'a man with a worthy cause' and an 'intensely earnest and capable Parliamentarian' according to 'Watchman' in the *Flintshire Observer*.<sup>45</sup> Although the Labour party did contest the seat, its candidate Frances Edwards stood little chance of winning it. Fred Llewellyn Jones won a resounding victory. He commanded over 70 per cent of the vote, and enjoyed a majority of over 40 per cent.<sup>46</sup> 'Celt' remarked that such a convincing win in a constituency like Flintshire was 'astonishing'.<sup>47</sup> Yet at what price? The disbanding of the divisional Liberal party meant Fred Llewellyn Jones left a lasting legacy. Whilst the party had avoided the temptation to split during the dark days of the Great War and the early 1920s, the economic crisis of 1931 had tested their tolerance to breaking point. The dissolution of the party inadvertently marked the end of the Liberals as the dominant political force in the constituency.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> *County Herald*, 16 October 1931.

<sup>45</sup> *Flintshire Observer*, 22 October 1931.

<sup>46</sup> The National Liberals gained 71.4 per cent of the vote, giving them a 42.8 per cent majority.

Elsewhere in North East Wales other concerns dominated Liberal thinking. In Montgomeryshire events took an unexpected turn. Clement Davies' decision to resign from the seat in 1930 had forced the divisional association to seek a new candidate. By mid 1931 a sense of urgency pervaded discussions regarding Davies' replacement. In March 1931 the Conservatives had adopted a new candidate, Edmund FitzHugh of Plas Power Hall Wrexham. A local man and a farmer, the *Montgomeryshire Express* speculated that he had the potential to attract a strong and loyal following. Thus the Liberals needed to find a candidate who could withstand FitzHugh's competition<sup>48</sup>.

Christmas Williams was selected in the late summer of that year. He already possessed parliamentary experience, having represented Wrexham in 1924. He was a Welsh speaker and had been brought up in nearby Brymbo. By the time of the election, though, the situation had altered once again. Having been groomed to take over Clement Davies' responsibilities Williams must have been disappointed to learn five days before his official adoption meeting on 13 October 1931, that Davies had reconsidered his position. Lever Brothers had decided to allow him to carry on with his parliamentary duties. Moreover the Conservative association had reassured Clement Davies that if he stood for re-election he would be unopposed, provided he continued to support the National Government.<sup>49</sup> Davies was later unrepentant about his decision to continue as candidate. In a letter to David Davies, written in 1939, he explained why he felt it his duty to continue in his role:

'I believe had there been an election in 1931 Chris Williams would have lost and the seat would have returned...in the state of things a Conservative for the first

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<sup>47</sup> *Liverpool Daily Post*, 29 October 1931.

<sup>48</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 3 March 1931.

time. I had pledged my word to my business colleagues that I would retire....They wanted me at a desk in the office for which I am paid. At the last moment they released me from my pledge and Chris Williams retired in my favour. I told the Conservatives in the plainest language that if they wanted to fight me they could. They chose not to do so – and I was elected unopposed.’<sup>50</sup>

In light of these new circumstances, Christmas Williams graciously bowed out of the political scene. Surprisingly the party supported Davies’ position on the National Government. J. Graham Jones argues that this had little to do with ideological beliefs. The influence of David Davies, as the chairman of the association, played a significant part in their acceptance. His personal hostility towards Lloyd George had not subsided and Jones says that his support ‘made Clement Davies’ position as a Simonite Liberal a less alarming prospect and more acceptable prospect’.<sup>51</sup> Consequently Clement Davies was returned unopposed to Parliament.

In Wrexham the campaign was a low key affair. Christmas Williams’ resignation as the Liberal candidate in August 1930 was a major blow for the party. Furthermore in the light of the departure of the Conservative candidate, Edmund Bushby, Robert Richards was in an even stronger position to retain the constituency for Labour. It took the Liberals almost a year to select Williams’ successor. Aled O. Roberts was adopted in June 1931 - his first foray into parliamentary politics. Reluctantly during the election of 1931 he momentarily gave up his commitment to Free Trade. The Liberal association’s support for the National Government meant that the Conservatives did not contest the seat. As a result the Liberals won a resounding victory over the Labour party. Thus in the autumn of 1931 not one of the

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<sup>49</sup> J. G. Jones, ‘Montgomeryshire Politics: Clement Davies and the National Government’, *op.cit.*, p.100.

<sup>50</sup> Clement Davies to David Davies, 3 January 1939, Clement Davies MS, 1/1/4.

four constituencies in North East Wales supported independent Liberalism. For a variety of reasons each representative toed the line of the National Government. In the short term this was beneficial as all were successful. However the implications for the future were far more ominous.

### *The aftermath of the 1931 election*

During the months following the contest the true extent of the damage sustained by the Liberal party began to emerge. The party had been spilt into three different groups. Any hope of a Liberal revival was now completely dashed. The splits that had weakened the parliamentary party had now permeated the constituency associations. Writing to Lloyd George after the election, Herbert Lewis could see little hope for the party's future. He advised the former premier to cut his losses and become a 'world statesman', as the Liberals stood little chance of improving their fortunes. He suggested:

'I wish it were possible for you to cut yourself loose from party moorings and to free yourself from the heavy and engrossing labour of building up a new party, with the inevitable manoeuvres, compromises and political management and tactics which it involves, to emancipate yourself from even National considerations and interests, refraining from the almost irresistible temptation to use justified reproaches, and to devote yourself entirely to wider issues which have emerged from the rapidly growing inter-dependence of all countries, and to the opposition to that selfish perversion of true Nationalism which infects the policy of all countries and threatens to plunge the world into ruin and chaos.'<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.103.

<sup>52</sup> J. Herbert Lewis to Lloyd George, 15 December 1931. J. H. Lewis MS,D30 108, NLW.

Responding to his friend's correspondence Lloyd George expressed his despair at the situation that faced his party. For much of 1931 illness prevented him from taking a fully active role in politics, yet he had been deeply angered by the management of the party in his absence. He was unhappy with the way Herbert Samuel had deputised for him, particularly as he had agreed to the 1931 election pact. He wrote to Herbert Lewis saying:

'Those who were responsible for Liberal direction after I was placed hors de combat surrendered all the passes to the enemy. The heights are now in command of the Protectionists: we are entirely at their mercy. The poor abject mob of Liberals are there cowering down in the swamps. They have ceased entirely to count. No one talks now of the extermination of the Liberal Party; for all practical purposes it is annihilated.'<sup>53</sup>

Despite his pessimism, though, Lloyd George had no desire to give up parliamentary politics or retire from public life. Nonetheless he felt that he was being increasingly marginalised due to the position his family group had taken. Writing in November 1932 he complained to Edward McCurdy:

'...I have never been invited to attend any meeting of the Liberals leaders. In fact, I have been deliberately excluded from such meetings ever since I opposed the disastrous Election in October 1931. In these circumstance there seems to me to be no basis for unity. I can support no policy from whatever quarter it comes which does not follow the lines of the strong progressive lead given by Liberalism at the

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<sup>53</sup> Lloyd George to J. Herbert Lewis, 31 December 1931. J. H. Lewis MS, D30 102, NLW.

Election of 1929. I will go further, and say that I will give whole-hearted support to any party that is prepared to put that programme into practical operation.’<sup>54</sup>

The bitterness that is conveyed in these letters, and the way in which his relationship with people like Henry Morris-Jones changed during this period, is revealing. His conspiratorial attitude facilitated the build-up of tension and hostility within the party. On a constituency level this fragmentation and splintering was starting to become visible. In an attempt to divert attention from the manoeuvrings of national party figures, Liberal headquarters encouraged their members to remain focused on organisational issues. Liberal officials and constituency agents needed to create some semblance of order amongst the confusion of their members before it was too late.

In December 1931 the Women’s Liberal Federation offered guidance to members who were unclear as to the party’s stance. In the *Liberal Woman’s News*, Lady Acland conveyed the position of the Executive Committee. In the first instance she suggested that Liberal discussion groups should focus on *issues* that concerned the party rather than discussing the nature of parliamentary politics. Electoral reform, disarmament and social reform were proposed as worthy subjects. Topics such as ‘free trade’ were to be approached pragmatically. Although Lady Acland acknowledged that presently the party supported the stance of the National Government, she emphasised the point that it was not yet known whether such measures would improve the national situation. Thus, in order to avoid divisions emerging she urged ‘we hope you will make every effort to keep your members together and raise funds by cheerful social events’.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Lloyd George to Edward McCurdy, 17 November 1932, Lloyd George MS, G/33 3/93, HLRO.



According to subsequent editions of the *Liberal Woman's News* the female Liberals of North East Wales remained active throughout this period. The journal's 'News from Wales' section recorded their activities. They were at their most active in the region's coastal towns. In Colwyn Bay, Rhyl and Prestatyn, and also inland in Holywell, meetings and social events were frequently arranged. As was seen during the late 1920s, often such activity implied the overall vitality of the local association. In areas like these Liberalism remained a live force. However the broader picture was not quite so positive. Constituency associations had to work to ensure that smaller branches of the party did not wither away.

Evidently the 1931 election had pulled Liberalism to pieces. Whilst some factions fought to preserve established and treasured Liberal values, others believed the party needed to move on. The party had lost its *raison d'être*. The likes of Clement Davies regarded supporting the National Government, which was 'above' party politics, as a far more important duty. Writing to his son Stanley in 1943, he outlined his position after the 1931 crisis:

'The others [Samuelites] refused to form part of the Coalition. They began, in 1931, with the others, in forming the first Coalition under Ramsay MacDonald, but they broke away on what I thought then was a very narrow and out-of-date question, namely – FREE TRADE. Not that I do not think Free Trade is essential but, as all the other countries were now fixing quotas and prohibiting trade in excess of the quota, I felt that we had to take some counter-measures in order to bring these other countries to a sense of reality.'<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Lady Acland, 'Suggestions to Women's Liberal Associations', *The Liberal Woman's News*, December 1931.

The Liberals of North East Wales did not escape the dilemmas facing the party following the Ottawa Conference. This was acutely illustrated in Flintshire when the divisional party re-formed in June 1932. After a long interval following the election of 1931, they were eager once again to take an active role on the constituency's political scene. Yet they faced a difficult challenge. They had severed their links with the division's most prominent Liberal, Fred Llewellyn Jones. He continued to build a credible reputation for himself amongst the electorate. Significantly, though, up until the end of 1932 it was the Conservatives, as opposed to the Liberals, who supported him in his public appearances. The nature of this relationship changed in September 1932 when Jones relinquished his ties with the National Government. His decision caused much anger in Tory ranks. Like Herbert Samuel he felt that he had no choice but to cross the floor of the Commons. He objected to the recommendations of the Ottawa conference which pressed for tariffs to be put on goods, including food, sold to countries outside the Commonwealth. For most moderate Liberals this was accepting the principle of protectionism. Despite his actions, though, Jones was not welcomed back into the fold of the Flintshire Liberals. In a letter following his resignation in 1934, he told Henry Gladstone that neither he nor his family had been invited to any party meeting or function since October 1931:

'You will probably be surprised and amused to learn that since the General Election of 1931 no invitation to attend any meeting of the Flintshire Liberal Association or of the County Executive Committee has been sent either to any member of my family or myself, until I was asked last week to attend a meeting of the Executive [February 1934] to confer with the body. This policy has been pursued by the heads of the present Association although I have all along received the official party whip

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<sup>56</sup> Clement Davies to Stanley Clement-Davies, 3 November 1943, Clement Davies MS, C/1/16, NLW.

and have spoken repeatedly in the House on behalf of and at the request of the Parliamentary Party.’<sup>57</sup>

Pride and principle had severely disabled the Flintshire Liberals in their attempts to influence the electorate. By the early 1930s it had become one of the most radical associations in North Wales. Thus the likes of Gomer Owen and Thomas Waterhouse found it difficult to work with a man like Fred Llewellyn Jones, who seemingly flitted from one wing of the party to another. As prominent members of the constituency party they were able to influence the position of local Liberals. Both were ardent admirers of Lloyd George. Nonetheless their attitudes towards Jones did differ slightly. Thomas Waterhouse was a man of high political principle who had been impressed with Lloyd George’s conduct since the 1931 election. Indeed, from being an arch anti-Coalitionist between 1918 and 1922 Stuart Waterhouse recalls how, by this time, his father had become a ‘close confidant’ of the former premier.<sup>58</sup> In a letter to Waterhouse discussing the position of the North Wales Liberal Federation, of which Waterhouse was chairman, Lloyd George revealed ‘I fear you are the only one who will put up a fight for Radicalism’.<sup>59</sup> By this time Thomas Waterhouse, and other like-minded Liberals in North Wales, were trying to persuade him to re-enter the political arena on a full time basis. Richard Morris, an activist from Denbigh warned:

‘The position in North Wales is getting precarious. If, for instance, an election were to take place in Flintshire next week the present adopted liberal candidate [J. E. Emlyn-Jones] would be at the bottom of the poll. The party is dead in London and other places. The Welsh people are not likely to carry a corpse, at all events, for

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<sup>57</sup> Fred Llewellyn Jones to Henry Gladstone, 18 February 1934, Glynne-Gladstone MS, DM/GG/946, FRO.

<sup>58</sup> Stuart Waterhouse to Sian Jones, 11 June 2001. In author’s possession.

long...The great majority of Welsh liberals are just standing where they are hoping, sooner or later – and sooner rather than later – for a guiding word from you to whom they owe so much. But they are disinclined to stand still much longer, simply to disappear in the prevailing mist.’<sup>60</sup>

Whilst the mood of some Lloyd Georgites was far from conciliatory, by 1933 some figures within the Flintshire party were starting to comprehend the association’s inherent weakness. Both Gomer Owen and Henry Gladstone realised that they needed to mend their bridges with Fred Llewellyn Jones. In a meeting of the association’s Executive Committee in November 1933 Owen enthused:

‘I feel sure that the fact that Mr. Llewellyn Jones has gone over with the Liberal Party into opposition will prepare the way for our working together in the enthusiastic and harmonious manner which characterised our work before the last election.’<sup>61</sup>

Even though Llewellyn Jones was hailed as a ‘fit and proper person’ to represent the party this was too little, too late. In February 1934 he tendered his resignation. For Henry Gladstone this was a major cause of concern. He was astute enough to realise that the departure of this popular parliamentarian was bad news for the constituency party. The turmoil that the Flintshire association had undergone meant that they had not been able to groom their own candidate. Whilst many Liberal voters would probably have been unaware of the acrimonious split between party and candidate in 1931, utilising his experience and reputation might have given the party a new start. He wrote ‘it is with the

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<sup>59</sup> Lloyd George to Thomas Waterhouse, 23 January 1933, Lloyd George MS, G/34 1 12, HLRO.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Morris to Lloyd George, 13 March 1934, Lloyd George MS, G 34/3 51, HLRO.

most sincere regret that I have heard of your proposal to withdraw from Parliament, and would fain hope that you might be prepared to reconsider this'.<sup>62</sup> Gladstone's pleas came too late. Although Fred Llewellyn Jones had been described as being 'a law unto himself' his commitment to the Liberal cause was absolute.<sup>63</sup> Moreover his victory in the 1929 election and his ability to work successfully with the Conservatives in 1931 underlined his popularity with a broad section of the constituency. Whilst the electoral statistics suggest that Jones was in tune with the wishes of the electorate, he failed to convince the divisional Liberal association. Increasingly they became more doctrinaire in their approach, which alienated a significant proportion of their core voters.<sup>64</sup>

A similar story prevailed in Denbigh and, to a lesser extent, Montgomeryshire. The perception amongst Liberals in the Denbigh constituency was that Henry Morris-Jones had betrayed their cause. In his capacity as chairman of the North Wales Liberal Federation, Thomas Waterhouse bitterly attacked Morris-Jones' political convictions:

'Dr Morris Jones in his speech at Ruthin described himself as a hardened politician. We already suspected that, and indeed none but hardened politicians could have leant themselves to Tory intrigue in the House of Commons before the last election, when the Simonite Liberals threw over Liberal principles and sent out an SOS to the Tory party, 'Save Our Seats.'<sup>65</sup>

Once again the division's Liberal association was deeply divided. The fact that Morris-Jones had also been appointed a government whip in 1932 heightened tensions. By mid

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<sup>61</sup> Flintshire Liberal Association minutes, 18 November 1933, D/DM/350 FRO.

<sup>62</sup> Henry Gladstone to Fred Llewellyn Jones, 15 February 1934, Glynne-Gladstone MS, DM/GG/946, FRO.

<sup>63</sup> Stuart Waterhouse to Sian Jones, 11 June 2001. In author's possession.

<sup>64</sup> This was the case in 1935 when the Liberals commanded less than 30 per cent of the vote.

1933 local party branches were asked whether or not they could support Morris-Jones any longer. Whilst the results were by no means conclusive, by September 1933 the constituency party had disassociated itself from him.<sup>66</sup> Echoing the situation in Flintshire, Morris-Jones was reduced to attending Conservative functions in the constituency.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, and in contrast to Llewellyn Jones, Henry Morris-Jones persistently explained his reasons for supporting the National Government. He justified his position at the annual general meeting of the West Denbigh Liberals in 1934. Unlike other National Liberals he was genuinely convinced of the merits of MacDonald's administration. Yet despite the sympathy of some association members, the *Denbighshire Free Press* noted that the general consensus was against him.<sup>68</sup> Richard Morris observed that through his actions Morris-Jones had polarised opinion within the party. He was in no doubt that the independent Liberals wanted to finance their own candidate in a future electoral contest, as they were so disillusioned with the attitude of their parliamentary representative. Indeed in a letter to Lloyd George he suggested that members of both the Liberal and Labour parties were eager to hear him speak in light of the perceived Conservative domination of the constituency:

‘Such a meeting might be possible in Denbigh, an appropriate place to start from because Morris-Jones, who grossly betrayed the Liberals, will be re-elected as a National with Liberal and Labour fighting.’<sup>69</sup>

Essentially Morris hoped to engineer an alliance between the two parties. He was taken by the fact that so many Labour supporters were members of the Denbigh Liberal Club and

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<sup>65</sup> *County Herald*, 27 October 1933.

<sup>66</sup> *Denbighshire Free Press*, 9 September 1933.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 April 1934.

were 'associating freely and amicably' with Liberals.<sup>70</sup> Yet whilst he believed it was 'hopeless to expect Labour to consider an arrangement with the tame and colourless Liberalism of Ramsay Muir' he argued that if Lloyd George led the party Labour would be unable to resist his appeal.<sup>71</sup> Morris assured the veteran politician 'you are good for a couple of million votes'.<sup>72</sup>

Whilst anger and frustration motivated Liberal associations in Denbigh and Flintshire to meet on a regular basis during the early 1930s, in Montgomeryshire the situation was very different. The divisional party increasingly withdrew from public life during this period. Their minutes reveal that in 1933 they had failed to raise even £50 from the activities of their local associations. Moreover they owed in excess of £250 to the bank, a highly unusual situation for them. According to the executive committee one of the main problems the party faced was the general 'lack of interest in politics' in the constituency.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless whilst the symptoms of the division's political malaise was highlighted, little was done to remedy the situation. Although suggestions, such as inviting prominent Liberal politicians to the area, were put forward no action was taken.<sup>74</sup> The local press had their own views on why the electorate was uninspired. The *Montgomeryshire County Times* remarked at the inactivity of their parliamentary member. In January 1934 it observed:

'...it is a long time since Montgomeryshire had any indication from Mr. Clement Davies as to how, if at all, he is pursuing his Parliamentary duties. Not only is Mr.

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<sup>69</sup> Richard Morris to Lloyd George, 12 June 1934, Lloyd George MS, G/35/1/25, HLRO.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Morris to Lloyd George, 11 June 1934, Lloyd George MS, G/35/1/24, HLRO.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

Davies silent at Westminster but Parliamentary vacations go past and his voice is never heard in the constituency...The present day's MPs, as exemplified by local specimens, either do not worry much about their stewardship, or else concern themselves very little about taking into their confidence those who sent them to Parliament.'<sup>75</sup>

The paper implied that Clement Davies was failing the local electorate. It asserted that only a small minority of his farming constituents had actually benefited from his assistance. Moreover it argued that Davies had effectively disenfranchised the people of Montgomeryshire: 'it is about time Mr. Davies woke up, and as a mere act of courtesy gave account of himself to his constituents'.<sup>76</sup> Unusually the *Montgomeryshire Express* also expressed similar views.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless with no notable political opposition in the division, Davies' career was secure. Both the Conservatives and the Labour party had gone into steep decline since 1931. Liberalism remained the only 'live' political force in the county. The most significant threat to his position came from within the Liberal party itself.

Ironically it was the Wrexham Liberal party that remained the most cohesive body in the region during these difficult years. Although they had reluctantly supported the National Government in 1931, like Fred Llewellyn Jones, Aled O. Roberts had crossed the floor of the Commons in protest over the Ottawa Conference. At a Liberal women's meeting in Wrexham he expressed his disappointment with MacDonald's administration, accusing him of reverting to 'Tory politics'.<sup>78</sup> His decision to pledge his allegiance to Lloyd George

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<sup>75</sup> *Montgomeryshire County Times*, 6 January 1934.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Montgomeryshire Express*, 16 March 1935.

<sup>78</sup> *Wrexham Leader*, 16 November 1932.



in 1933 delighted local party members. Following his decision, Roberts launched a vigorous campaign to raise the party's profile. In June 1934 Megan Lloyd George visited the area and addressed an audience of nearly two thousand people at the Rhos Miners' Institute. The following month her father came to Wrexham to open the town's new public assistance institution. In the Commons Roberts, along with D. O. Evans the MP for Cardiganshire, instigated the formation of the Welsh Liberal Group. This was to be chaired by Lloyd George and provided a forum for discussion for all Welsh Liberal MPs.<sup>79</sup> Despite this flurry of activity the Liberals were not strongly placed in the constituency. Relations with the Conservatives had deteriorated further by 1935, since Roberts had severed his ties with the government. The Tories had already been angered by the Liberals' behaviour in 1931. It was their assertion that their sacrifice in not fielding a candidate had not been adequately recognised, thus their wrath undermined Liberal activities.

### *The 1935 Election*

Nationally the Liberals were in a very weak position by 1935. Whilst the Samuelites had returned to the opposition benches (joining the Lloyd George Family Group), Sir John Simon and his followers remained staunchly loyal to the National Government. Thus, the divisions that continued to trouble the party lay deep, and the differences between the Simonites and the other groups were seemingly irreconcilable. In the meantime their political opponents were capitalising on their position, and making headway in areas of former Liberal strength – such as North Wales and the West country.

The election of 1935 confirmed the demise of Liberalism. In a letter to Haydn Jones, Richard Holt, himself a former MP and political organiser wrote: '...it is terrible to reflect

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<sup>79</sup> Wrexham Leader, 17 February 1933. In its first meeting, 10 of the 13 Welsh Liberal MP's attended. Of these 6 were Samuelites, 4 Lloyd Georgites and 3 Simonites.

that whereas 30 years ago we swept the board now we can only retain some 20 members and most of those for personal reasons'.<sup>80</sup> The years leading up to the contest had been disastrous for the party. The vulnerability of the Liberals was truly exposed as the three different factions vied for the party's moral high ground. The tensions that existed amongst Liberals in North East Wales was neither exceptional nor unusual. Only 21 Liberal MP's returned to Parliament following the election. Three of the seven Welsh Liberal MP's represented constituencies in North East Wales. The Liberals were now effectively reduced to minority party status. They possessed no concentrated body of supporters. Few of their remaining seats could be regarded as safe. Moreover, some of the party's most prominent and outstanding figures failed to return to Parliament. Herbert Samuel lost his seat. One of the greatest surprises was the ousting of Isaac Foot from the Cornish constituency of Bodmin. He very much embodied the spirit of Liberalism through his devotion to Nonconformity and Free Trade. His departure heralded the death knell for the party in that region. In many respects North Wales was one of the party's last bastions. The constituencies of Montgomeryshire and Denbigh, in particular, were regarded as strongholds. Yet if they were to be seen as the benchmark for other associations, then the party truly was in deep trouble. Bitterness, confusion and divisions still characterised the nature of politics in these constituencies.

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<sup>80</sup> R. D. Holt to H. H. Jones, 20 November 1935, H. H. Jones MS, fo.474, NLW.

Table 6.2

Result of 1935 Election in North East Wales

| <i>Constituency</i>    | <i>Candidate</i>   | <i>Party</i> | <i>Number of votes</i> | <i>Percentage of vote</i> | <i>Majority</i> | <i>Turnout</i> |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <i>Denbigh</i>         | J. H. Morris-Jones | Nat.Lib      | 17372                  | 50.1                      | 14.5%           | 75.1%          |
|                        | J.C. Davies        | Lib          | 12329                  | 35.6                      | -               | -              |
|                        | J. R. Hughes       | Lab          | 4963                   | 14.3                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Flintshire</i>      | G. Rowlands        | Con          | 26644                  | 44.9                      | 17%             | 76.3%          |
|                        | J. E. Emlyn-Jones  | Lib          | 16536                  | 27.9                      | -               | -              |
|                        | C. O. Jones        | Lab          | 16131                  | 27.2                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Montgomeryshire</i> | E. C. Davies       | Lib          | Unopposed              | -                         | -               | -              |
| <i>Wrexham</i>         | R. Richards        | Lab          | 23650                  | 56.3                      | 12.6%           | 75.5%          |
|                        | A. O. Roberts      | Lib          | 18367                  | 43.7                      | -               | -              |

Source: F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, Glasgow 1969.

Whilst some parties in North East Wales had sorted out their differences by 1935, others remained fragmented. In Montgomeryshire Clement Davies did not face opposition from his political opponents, yet members of his own party were unsure whether he was still suitable to represent their interests. Some party activists feared that his support for the National Government was at variance with their core sympathisers. In September 1935 the party's minute book reveals that the 'Liberals of Llanidloes oppose Mr. Davies' relationship to the National Government'.<sup>81</sup> It was alleged that Davies' affiliation to the government was strangling the lifeblood of the party. G. F. Hamer (chairman of the Llanidloes Liberals) noted that in general Llanidloes was 'politically dead'.<sup>82</sup> Moreover further discussion amongst representatives from other local associations revealed that

<sup>81</sup> Montgomeryshire Liberal Association minutes, 21 September 1935, NLW.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

political apathy was a major problem amongst their members and prevented the party from moving forward.<sup>83</sup>

Hamer represented the wing of the Montgomeryshire party which was both frustrated and disillusioned with Davies' work. This led him to propose a motion that would allow each branch of the constituency party an opportunity to vote independently as to the suitability of Davies to stand as their candidate for a third time. The result of this ballot was far from a decisive victory for Clement Davies. Although ultimately he was victorious, by 72 votes to 32, this was not the resounding vote of confidence he had hoped for.<sup>84</sup> He was undeterred in his ambition to stand again for election. However the mere fact that such a sizeable minority of his own party did not have faith in his abilities must have lowered his morale.

In the Denbigh division, Henry Morris-Jones was well aware of the opposition that existed within Liberal ranks. Unlike other parliamentarians in the region who had reluctantly supported the National Government for either pragmatic (Fred Llewellyn Jones and Aled O. Roberts) or personal reasons (Clement Davies),<sup>85</sup> Morris-Jones displayed a genuine admiration for the administration. He regarded the National Government as 'the result of an unprecedented manifestation of the wishes of the electorate'.<sup>86</sup> Indeed he was by far the most conservative in his approach of the four men. Whilst others had flinched at the proposals of the Ottawa Conference he had commended them.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Montgomeryshire Express, 2 November 1935.

<sup>85</sup> Clement Davies had become disillusioned with Lloyd George following the former premier's decision to support the 1930 Coal Bill with no Liberal amendments.

<sup>86</sup> Henry Morris-Jones, Doctor in the Whip's Room, op. cit, p.96.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

For the first time in over a decade there was a three cornered contest in the constituency. Significantly the two candidates vying for victory were both Liberals. This had happened once before, and characteristically the contest that ensued transpired to be far more aggressive in its nature than any 'straight fight' between candidates of different parties. J. R. Hughes the Labour representative was very much sidelined as the feuding got under way. Morris-Jones' chief opponent was John Cledwyn Davies, himself a former MP for the division and the county's director of education. He had been persuaded back into the political arena due to his belief that Morris-Jones was failing to represent the Liberal cause. Although the two had been friends for over forty years, he branded the incumbent a 'turncoat' and attacked his personal integrity.<sup>88</sup> Whilst Morris-Jones did his best to avoid the mud slinging, he expressed his grave disappointment at the behaviour of one of his former friends.<sup>89</sup>

In his autobiography Morris-Jones recalls that the outcome of the contest was far from being a foregone conclusion. Although he had retained the loyalty of some of the constituency's most prominent Liberals, including Lord Clwyd and the party agent Sydney Watkins, the divisional association had deserted him. They had voted by 66 votes to 42 not to support his candidacy and to seek other representation instead. Thus it was J. C. Davies who won their backing.<sup>90</sup> Nonetheless Morris-Jones possessed a clear advantage over his main opponent. He was able to rely on the support of the Conservatives and the local farming community. Significantly he was the only candidate to address the county branch of the National Farmers Union, and it seems he received a warm reception from the agricultural fraternity.<sup>91</sup> With such backing his parliamentary career seemed assured. Yet

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<sup>88</sup> Denbighshire Free Press, 9 November 1935.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Henry Morris-Jones, Doctor in the Whip's Room, *op. cit.*, p.100.

<sup>91</sup> Denbighshire Free Press, 9 November 1935.

despite his eventual victory the electoral statistics reflect the tension that existed within Liberal ranks. Morris-Jones captured a little over half of all the votes cast, but J. C. Davies was not far behind commanding over a third of the vote. Consequently not only did the result indicate the strength of Liberalism in the constituency, it also illustrated the depth of the division within Liberal ranks.

Following his success Morris-Jones received a congratulatory note from John Simon, which underlined their political compatibility and cordial relationship:

‘...I must now warmly congratulate you on the splendid result of your fight – it is the *greatest personal triumph* of the Election. I went down to see the Prime Minister at Chequers yesterday afternoon and pointed out to him what a magnificent achievement it was. You know that I shall do everything possible in Parliament to secure you the recognition which you would naturally like to receive. I hope you will continue as the Liberal Nat. whip...’<sup>92</sup>

Morris-Jones continued in his role as whip until 1937. Whilst the divisions in his local association intensified, in Parliament he was rewarded for his loyalty to the National Government. The Liberals’ success in Denbigh relied heavily on the Tories. This was not the case in either Flintshire or Wrexham where, for different reasons, the intervention of the party’s main political rivals foiled Liberal chances.

Fred Llewellyn Jones’ decision to retire from political life in early 1934 left a large void to be filled by the Liberal party in Flintshire. Despite the fact that relations had been strained

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<sup>92</sup> Sir John Simon to Henry Morris-Jones, 18 November 1935, J. H. Morris-Jones MS, D MJ 36 FRO.

between him and the constituency association since 1931, he was the party's most recognisable figure in the division. Moreover he had become popular and well respected amongst the electorate. Following his announcement the party was at a loss. From being one of the strongest Liberal associations in 1918, they had been reduced to a small radical group which was apparently out of tune with the wishes of their electorate. Their new candidate, J. E. Emlyn Jones, shared the party's ideological outlook.<sup>93</sup> A veteran politician who had contested six parliamentary contests, winning two of them, he closely aligned himself with Lloyd George. Indeed he defined his brand of politics as 'Liberalism with a kick in it'.<sup>94</sup> Yet whilst his election pledges also reflected the values of traditional Liberalism, the *Flintshire Observer* noted the difficult fight that lay ahead of him:

'It is safe to presume that the new Liberal candidate will not wield the same powerful influence over his Flintshire electors as that enjoyed by Mr. F. Llewellyn Jones...'<sup>95</sup>

This observation was an accurate reflection of the situation. Even committed Liberals recognised the political realities which Emlyn Jones faced. Following the election Goronwy Owen wrote to his father-in-law of the warning he had given Emlyn Jones some months prior to the election:

'When I reminded Emlyn Jones...that Flint was the very worst area in which to hoist the Free Trade banner under present conditions, Emlyn loftily said that we must stand by our principles...I told him that if he took that line he would march to inevitable defeat, and I asked him: 'Are you seeking membership or martyrdom?'

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<sup>93</sup> County Herald, 16 November 1934.

<sup>94</sup> Flintshire Liberal Association minutes, 27 September 1934, D/DM/350 FRO.

Do you want to go to Westminster or to Heaven at this election?’<sup>96</sup>

This lack of electoral realism and political skill – to stress a principle even if it meant defeat – seemed to be infecting the Liberal party. With regard to the North Wales Liberal Federation, which at the time was under the stewardship of Thomas Waterhouse and Gomer Owen, Goronwy Owen asserted: ‘Unless Liberalism in North Wales is rescued from their leadership I can see no hope for its future’. Predictably Emlyn Jones and the party failed to heed Goronwy Owen’s advice. The appeal of the National Government was too strong for the constituency’s electorate to resist. The success of their protectionist policies, as illustrated in Chapter 1, was a powerful decider. The Conservatives romped to victory, attracting over 10,000 more votes than the Liberals. Moreover this contest held special significance for Liberalism in Flintshire. Only a few hundred votes separated them from the Labour party. Never again were they to represent the seat. The decline of the Liberal party in this constituency had been rapid. Liberals had lost touch with their constituents’ needs. To a large extent they had been the architects of their own downfall. During the depression of the 1930s the pragmatism espoused by Fred Llewellyn Jones was far more attractive to voters than the doctrinaire politics of J. E. Emlyn Jones. The actions of senior figures within the constituency association during the early part of the decade had effectively sealed their fate. But underpinning this were doubts about what Liberalism should mean in an age of changing policy realities, and what were the best tactics to preserve the party’s principles.

The 1935 contest also marked an important watershed in the political history of the Wrexham constituency. To the Liberals’ great surprise this was not a three cornered

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<sup>95</sup> *Flintshire Observer*, 21 February 1935.

<sup>96</sup> Goronwy Owen to Lloyd George, 20 February 1936, Lloyd George MS, G/15/16/2, HLRO.



contest. The Conservatives decided not to field a candidate. Thus, they entered the election with a strong advantage. On each of the three previous occasions when Labour had been their only opponent they had been victorious. Aled O. Roberts entered the contest making no apology for his opposition to the National Government:

‘I offer myself to you as a real Liberal. I want as many Labour and Conservative votes as I can get, but I don’t want anybody to say I have been returned as a Tory or a Socialist.’<sup>97</sup>

His divisional party were delighted with his uncompromising stance. Yet the *Wrexham and North Wales Guardian* observed that the contest itself was ‘an unusually uneventful one’. Like the situation in Flintshire, the electorate was no longer receptive to traditional Liberal values. The Conservatives refused to support such an approach, and Labour seemed to offer the only real reforming alternative. Robert Richards was ushered in as the constituency’s new MP. Whilst this was an important victory for Labour, it also illustrated the extent to which Conservative supporters felt alienated from the Liberal cause. The turnout at the 1935 contest was the lowest since the election of 1918 in Wrexham. Nearly 13,000 electors failed to register their vote. Speaking at a meeting of the town’s Women’s Liberal Association shortly after the election Aled Roberts spoke of his belief that the Conservative party had actively discouraged its supporters from voting for the Liberal party.<sup>98</sup> An independent Liberal had little viability.

### Conclusion

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<sup>97</sup> Wrexham and North Wales Guardian, 29 October 1935.

<sup>98</sup> Wrexham and North Wales Guardian, 21 January 1936.

The decline of the Liberal party in the industrial constituencies of North East Wales appeared to be all but complete by 1935. No longer did the party fulfil the needs and wishes of the electorate. The party's failure to retain Flintshire with their radical brand of politics confirmed this trend. Yet although local factors, unique to individual constituency associations may be partly blamed for their demise, the bulk of the blame must rest with the national party. From 1931 onwards the party was torn apart. The definition of 'Liberalism' as a political ideology became looser and more open to interpretation. It needed a national leadership to explain its continued relevance. However, the party had three leaders, not one, reflecting this ideological political and tactical confusion. It was impossible for them to act as a unified and united body. Whilst in the rural seats of Montgomeryshire and Denbigh the party survived, this was not due to the actions of the divisional parties. These were constituencies that had been, for the most part, untouched by large-scale social and economic change since 1918. Liberalism was very much incorporated in their social and cultural values and traditions. Whilst local Liberal associations gave these traditions a political voice, the prevalence of Nonconformity and the Welsh language supported its existence on a day to day basis. This meant, perhaps, that people's allegiances were allied to principles and values, rather than to a party's policies and action. 'Loyalty' and 'habit' might be sufficient to retain support, but it would be increasingly difficult to do so as older voters died and younger voters adopted different values. Moreover, the 'relevance' of the party – its capacity to provide credible ideas and to seem a competent mechanism for addressing modern problems - was called into question by its confusion. Other parties seemed more alive to these matters, and often embraced some aspects of a Liberal tradition. If the Liberals dominated in the 1920s – and were the dominant ideological and political force- in the 1930s it was the National Government and its approach that was in the ascendancy. In areas that had undergone

greater social change, the party could not rely on such loyalty any longer. Much of the electorate was unfamiliar with their intrinsic beliefs, and consequently judged the party on its political merits. On this basis Liberalism was not an attractive option. Thus a new phase in the region's electoral history opened.

## *Chapter 7*

### *The impact of national politics*

Labour's parliamentary victory in 1929 demonstrates the extent to which the party had consolidated its support and grown since 1918. Not only were they attracting the votes of the industrial working classes, their appeal was extending beyond the confines of their 'traditional' electoral base. In part this may be attributed to their gradual permeation of local society. Since the 1920s the party's presence in local government had increased. This afforded them the opportunity to persuade the electorate that they were not the party of riot and revolution, but rather of progress and pragmatism. Even if not successful initially, such persistence was vital if they were to emulate the Liberals and Conservatives and institutionalise themselves at the heart of the community. In North East Wales, however, the party was slow to penetrate the structures of local politics. As late as 1932 the *North Wales Labour Searchlight* accused the party of not making enough effort in the local political arena. It claimed:

'Labour in North Wales does not take Local Government seriously enough. Of all the Local Government bodies in the six counties, I doubt whether Labour could muster sufficient representatives to form a decent parish council! As far as West Denbighshire goes, its two boroughs, Denbigh and Ruthin, have not a single representative; in fact I should be surprised to hear that the workers of those towns had shed the inferiority complex sufficiently to have dared to challenge

the powers that be.’<sup>1</sup>

Although Labour did make some significant inroads, these tended to be in the strong industrial pockets. The party failed to make a lasting impression on local government here until the late 1930s. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Labour held out little hope of capturing the region’s agricultural areas, even though in Wrexham and Flintshire the party’s influence was steadily growing. Writing to the Merioneth MP, Haydn Jones, Huw Cernyw Williams observed that in 1931 Labour lacked the ‘moral’ and spiritual presence to penetrate rural political circles. Referring to the character of Merioneth, which bore many similarities to Montgomeryshire and Denbigh, he said ‘I believe there is still much Liberal conviction in the county.’<sup>2</sup>

Both Labour and the Conservatives approached the problem of gaining support in North East Wales with some tact. Their aim was to marginalise the Liberal party. During the years following the coupon election they had identified their own limitations in the region. Whilst Labour’s presence was minimal in Denbigh and Montgomeryshire, the Conservatives shied away from regularly contesting the Wrexham seat. Significantly, though, both believed they could capture the socially and economically diverse seat of Flintshire. Yet during the period leading up to the 1929 election the Liberals had shown that even when all three parties were as active as each other in Flintshire, they continued to dominate. However even here politics was to polarise over the next five years as the Liberals declined. Thus, much was at stake in this political battle to supplant the Liberal party.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in C. Williams, ‘Labour and the challenge of Local Government, 1919-1939’ in D. Tanner, C. Williams & D. Hopkin (eds), The Labour Party in Wales, 1900-2000, Cardiff 2000, p.145.

For a small number of dedicated activists, belonging to each of the main parties, the aftermath of the 1929 election was an opportunity to reflect and to contemplate their respective party's future. They understood the necessity of developing a clear strategy if they were to secure their future standing in the region. Few individuals possessed this vision. One of the most notable in North East Wales was Cyril O. Jones. In the same way that Thomas Waterhouse fiercely represented Liberalism, Jones strove to promote the socialist cause in North Wales. In 1929 he had been disappointed following his unsuccessful bid to capture the Flintshire seat. Nevertheless he was convinced that victory would one day be in their grasp if the party made a concerted effort. He advocated the development of a strategy that could be applied to North Wales in its entirety. However, he believed this could not be achieved unless the party was unified and focused in its approach.

Cyril O. Jones resigned as the Flintshire candidate in June 1929. Following his brother's election as the Liberal MP for the constituency, he felt unable to continue in this position. In his resignation speech he recommended that the divisional association review key areas of its organisation. The basic principles he offered echoed a speech that he would later give to the North Wales Labour Council. In the first instance he urged the constituency party to consolidate their existing support. In Flintshire's villages and small towns, like Treuddyn, Coed Talon, Leeswood, Buckley, Bagillt, Ffynongroew, Gronant and Newmarket, he believed lived their most ardent and vocal activists.<sup>3</sup> He urged the party not to neglect these people, arguing the party should be identifying their needs and listening to their recommendations. Moreover he advised the association to target the larger areas of Flint, Shotton and Deeside.

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<sup>2</sup> H. C. Williams to H .H. Jones, 19 June 1931, H .H. Jones MS, fo 360, NLW.

<sup>3</sup> County Herald, 28 June 1929.

This was the constituency's industrial heartland, and without the support of its voters Labour would never be a major force. Yet whilst Cyril O. Jones believed the party could succeed in Flintshire, he argued this was not the case for the remainder of North Wales. Aside from the Wrexham division, the party had 'either stood still or else gone back' since 1918.<sup>4</sup> He asserted that party headquarters in London failed to appreciate the obstacles that Labour faced in rural and semi-rural constituencies. Until the necessary support was available Labour had little chance of making North Wales into a stronghold.<sup>5</sup>

At a conference convened by the North Wales Labour Council in January 1930, Jones gave a paper entitled 'A review of the political situation in North Wales'.<sup>6</sup> Essentially this afforded him the opportunity to express his views to a wider audience. As a well respected Labour activist, expressing views many shared, his address had an immediate impact. Within a fortnight of the conference the Council's executive had invited him to put forward his suggestions on how the Labour party could improve its standing in North Wales. He proposed eleven different changes. These were:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

- i. Support for the socialisation of land, power and transport.
- ii. Greater party organisation, particularly with regard to the constituencies. If divisional parties are weak they should consider grouping with other parties. Greater pressure should be placed upon the leadership UK to ensure a full time organiser for North Wales.
- iii. Improve propaganda through inviting more public speakers to the area and ensuring better press coverage.
- iv. Introducing a page of Welsh news in the *Daily Herald*, which would include a column written in Welsh. Also, Labour pamphlets should be distributed in Welsh.
- v. Attracting and selecting younger candidates to build a stronger rapport with the electorate.
- vi. Acknowledge Welsh needs as they are both distinctive and separate to English ones.
- vii. Proper attention should be given to the North Wales movement by headquarters, and from time to time 'first class outstanding National Speakers should speak at strategic centres'.
- viii. Greater co-operation between adjoining constituencies for propaganda purposes.
- ix. North Wales Labour conferences to be held at regular intervals.
- x. Greater attention to be paid to the Women's sections.
- xi. More attention should be devoted to local politics at county, borough, urban, rural and parish level. He said 'a real Labour programme in municipal matters should be formulated.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> North Wales Labour Council minutes, 25 January 1930. H. T. Edwards Ms, C1, NLW. This document was mistakenly attributed to H. T. Edwards in D. Tanner, C. Williams & D. Hopkin, *The Labour Party in Wales*, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> North Wales Labour Council minutes, 8 February 1930. H. T. Edwards Ms, C1, NLW.



Cyril O. Jones' recommendations were based on his own political experience. He believed the party in North Wales had endured years of neglect by Labour's Cardiff office – which perceived Welsh issues as ones primarily concerning the south. Whilst the points raised by Jones typified the views of many North Walien activists, they were ignored by the national party because of the cost, because they were concerned about inciting nationalism and because they feared powerful regional organisations would become a platform for the left.<sup>8</sup> However his recommendations did spur the Flintshire and Wrexham parties into action. Both reviewed their political strategies. Following Cyril O. Jones' departure as a candidate, a propaganda committee was established in Flintshire.

Whilst the Flintshire party was still finding its political feet, the Wrexham association occupied a stronger position in its division. By this time it had established a firm political infrastructure. Yet although a dedicated core of activists led the party they were aware that their enthusiasm and commitment was not necessarily shared by all their members. Political apathy was seen as a major threat to their advancement. Thus from 1930 onwards the divisional association instigated a drive to raise its profile in the local community. Although these efforts were *ad hoc*, and did not adhere to any long term strategy, it does show that the party was eager to improve its standing. Their initial aim was to target local associations who had been inactive for some time. Branches in Stansty, Coedpoeth, New Broughton, Penycae, Southsea, Ruabon and Gwersyllt were identified as the worst offenders. To resolve this

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<sup>8</sup> D. M. Tanner, 'The pattern of Labour politics, 1918-1939' in D. M. Tanner, C. Williams & D. Hopkin, The Labour Party in Wales 1900-2000, op. cit, p.128.

situation the secretary was to visit all seven associations 'with a view of getting each one to become a real live force in their respective districts'.<sup>9</sup>

Combined with this effort to revive grassroots support was a desire to achieve a greater presence in local politics. For many years success in this arena had eluded them. Nonetheless the party was doubly handicapped as it also failed to attract prospective candidates of a high calibre. Primarily this was due to the fact that Council meetings were held during the day when many Labour members were at work. Furthermore personality and local patronage were far more important considerations in local contests.<sup>10</sup> This was one reason why the Conservative party fared so well in these elections. In March 1930 Labour members discussed the possibility of establishing a Wrexham Borough Labour party, separate from the Wrexham divisional association. This would enable them to project a more united front in local government.<sup>11</sup> Moreover in October 1930 Hugh Hughes passed a motion that members belonging to the county, rural and borough councils were to meet on a monthly basis to discuss policy matters. Seconding Hughes' resolution, Cyril O. Jones argued this was a crucial development as all Labour representatives should be aware of their party's views and should present and develop a united policy.<sup>12</sup> Despite their efforts, though, Labour failed to secure a strong representation following the Wrexham Borough Council contest in 1931. The party still lagged behind its opponents with 4 seats, whereas the Conservatives won 12, Liberals 6 and

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<sup>9</sup> Wrexham Trades Council and Divisional Labour Party minutes, 18 February 1930, DD/DM/344 3, DRO.

<sup>10</sup> Eatwell, Roger, Wrexham ILP, Trades Council and Divisional Labour Party, 1903-1957. Unpublished article, NTD 589, DRO.

<sup>11</sup> Wrexham Trades Council and Divisional Labour Party minutes, 4 March 1930, DD/DM 344 3, DRO.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 18 October 1930, DD/DM 344/3, DRO.

the Ratepayers 6. Moreover in the county council elections, the following year, Labour won only 17 seats out of a possible 88 seats.<sup>13</sup>

However the Wrexham Labour party could ill afford to be disheartened with these results. Activists had to be motivated as this was far from being a safe Labour seat. They still needed to attract a stronger following and to sustain existing interest. In an attempt to broaden their appeal, the opening of a stall on Wrexham market to sell party literature was discussed in August 1931. Members of the executive committee were fully supportive of this initiative as it would ‘aid in awakening more interest and enthusiasm’ in the party, and by the November a stall had been established.<sup>14</sup> Although leaders of the Wrexham party struggled to maintain the interest of members during this period its progress was relatively steady:

Table 7.1

*Individual membership of the Wrexham Labour party, 1928-1932*

| 1928 | 1929 | 1930 | 1931 | 1932 |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| 360  | 360  | 1022 | 683  | 850  |

Source: Labour Party annual reports, 1929-1933

Whilst caution must be applied to the interpretation to these statistics, as reported membership figures for this period are notoriously inaccurate, the fact that they exceeded the 240 minimum membership implies their authenticity, particularly after 1930.<sup>15</sup> It would appear that the party was broadening its appeal, and had become institutionalised in the constituency. Activists had

<sup>13</sup> Eatwell, Roger, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Wrexham Trades Council and Divisional Labour Party minutes, 19 August 1931, DD/DM/344/4, DRO.

<sup>15</sup> Duncan Tanner, ‘Labour and its membership’, in D. Tanner, P. Thane & N. Tiratsoo, (eds), Labour’s First Century, Cambridge 2000, p.250.

proved that they were a responsible party, and could be cautious. Moreover the party's increasing involvement with the division's social problems after 1929 underlined their commitment to the community.

The North Wales Conservatives did not have an equivalent figure to Cyril O. Jones or Thomas Waterhouse to inspire their development. Although men like Sir Watkin Williams Wynn, the Earl of Powis and Edmund FitzHugh played prominent roles in the North Wales party they were not driven in the same way by their ideological convictions. Indeed a different mood and pace pervaded Conservative circles. Their approach was far more relaxed. Nonetheless this did not mean that they were complacent about their position. Party organisation was taken very seriously. Following the 1929 election the North Wales Tories were without a parliamentary representative. Yet although the loss of the Flintshire seat was a disappointment it did not deter them from planning for the future. The guidance received by the North East Wales Conservatives from Central Office ensured that the strategy adopted by all four divisional associations remained consistent. Although the strengths and standing of each constituency party varied, the emphasis they placed on arranging social functions, organising propaganda campaigns and retaining a strong presence in local politics was similar.

As the strongest Conservative association in the region, the Flintshire party best exemplifies such trends. Although they had been bruised following Goodman Roberts' defeat, they were committed to the party's future in the division and had remained an active force. Their primary aim was to inform the electorate of their values and broaden their appeal. Thus more effective propaganda was regarded as essential if they were to command a higher proportion of the vote at the next election. On a local level the main responsibility of the Flintshire propaganda

committee was to distribute party literature. In February 1931 the women's section led this drive, having ordered 10,000 leaflets.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless the party was greatly aided by Central Office in their campaign. In March 1931 Frank Waddington, the regional agent, advised the party to order more leaflets explaining the merits of 'safeguarding' to the electorate. Reflecting the changing nature of Flintshire, Welsh language leaflets were only to be distributed in the division's rural districts.<sup>17</sup> By September 1931 Waddington further advised the party to initiate a political tour to compliment the literature campaign, 'meetings should be held throughout the constituencies in order to explain the present situation and ...our own policy', he said.<sup>18</sup>

Another powerful tool used by the party's publicity machine was film. In 1931 the 'talkie' van visited both the Flintshire and Denbigh divisions. Constituency parties benefited from Central Office's faith in the technological advances of the age. 'Talkie' or cinema vans were used extensively during the 1920s and 1930s to promote the party's policies, and proved to be a huge success with voters. Between 1925 and 1939 film was believed to be one of the most potent and effective methods of publicity at their disposal. These mobile cinemas represented the cutting edge of electioneering. They were regarded by Central Office as the best way to reach out to the electorate. By 1930 there were 12 outdoor cinema vans in operation. T. J. Hollins notes that they had 'found a highly effective new medium of publicity, particularly for reaching the politically adverse or apathetic'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Flintshire Conservative Association minutes, 18 February 1931, D/DM/307/3, FRO. Neither the titles of these leaflets, nor the subject matter was given in the minutes.

<sup>17</sup> Flintshire Conservative Party minutes, 17 March 1931, D/DM/307/3, FRO.

<sup>18</sup> Flintshire Conservative Party minutes, 9 September 1931, D/DM/307/3, FRO.

In Flintshire the divisional association continued to remain focused on its political goals. Around the same time plans were afoot to arrange a summer school for Welsh women members in Rhyl.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore activists were also hungry for success in local government. They were committed to fight local elections on a partisan basis, and were eager to encourage independent candidates to contest under the Conservative banner.<sup>21</sup> In both these instances the party was successful. It boasted a thriving woman's group and enjoyed a fair representation on the county council. Although during the interwar period they never eclipsed the dominance of the Liberals, at this level they commanded a respectable following. Elsewhere in North East Wales the party failed to mount such a forceful challenge. The Denbigh association did not have the same determination. In the aftermath of the 1929 contest no critical analysis of their performance or strategy for the future was discussed. Initially the tone of their meetings was self-congratulatory. The result of the parliamentary contest had surprised many members. Following the withdrawal of Ann Brodrick a month prior to polling day, few had expected Captain A. C. Graham to attract a large number of votes. However when the results were announced it was revealed that Graham had actually polled a further 2000 more votes than his predecessor in 1924. The Conservatives' believed that had they had more time to promote their new candidate, they would have commanded an even higher percentage of the vote.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless the election campaign had been very costly for the Denbigh party. During the year leading up to the contest they had spent £1246, most of which had gone towards financing their new candidate. Whilst this was a relatively affluent association, in 1929 they

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<sup>19</sup> T. J. Hollins, 'The conservative party and film propaganda between the wars', *English Historical Review*, vol 96, 1981, p.363.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Flintshire Conservative Association minutes, 14 March 1931, D/DM/307/3, FRO.

had amassed over £1627 from subscription fees and fundraising events, the high costs they incurred eventually forced them to limit their activities. From the early 1930s onwards this level of income was not sustained. Increasingly the association experienced financial difficulties as expenditure exceeded income and subscriptions fell.<sup>23</sup> Yet such problems were not unique to the Denbigh division. During this time most political parties in the region experienced some sort of financial difficulties. This was certainly true in the case of the Wrexham and Montgomeryshire Tories. The Wrexham party had been experiencing problems of this nature since 1918. In Montgomeryshire the situation differed again. Whilst the Conservatives were the Liberals' main political opponents here, and had polled well in the 1929 contest, they too were beset with problems. As so many of the party's wealthy benefactors had died during the late 1920s funds were very low. In June 1930 the association owed £282, with little prospect of clearing the debt.<sup>24</sup> Although D. M. Jehu, their agent, was confident of their survival the party was limited in the assistance it could offer to its local branches. Nonetheless their appetite for success had not yet diminished. They were still an active force in the constituency. In 1930 the party had nine active local associations and ten women's groups under its jurisdiction. Moreover in January 1930 the county's newly formed Junior Imperial League held its first annual meeting, which augured well for the party's future.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Denbigh Division Conservative Association, 21 June 1929, DD/DM 6, DRO.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 27 June 1930.

<sup>24</sup> Montgomeryshire County Times, 21 June 1930.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 18 January 1930.

### *The 1931 Election*

The 1931 election plunged both Labour and the Liberals at Westminster into disarray. The circumstances that led to Ramsay MacDonald's decision to create a National Government was a step too far for most Labour MPs. They were unable to follow a leader who seemed to compromise their fundamental principles. Following this contest the party's parliamentary presence went into a steep decline. Many experienced socialist politicians failed to withstand the wave of support directed towards the government. Key figures such as Arthur Henderson lost their seats. Five hundred and twenty one MP's were returned who supported the new administration. Despite the formation of a 'National Labour' party, it was the Conservatives who fared best of all in this contest. In total 471 Tory MP's were returned to Parliament, along with 12 National Labour and 35 National Liberals.<sup>26</sup> In contrast the opposition could only muster 52 Labour and 35 Liberal representatives.

Nevertheless the Conservatives' national strength was not reflected in North East Wales. Given the problems that beset the region's Conservative associations following the 1929 contest, it is unsurprising that they willingly joined forces with the Liberals in October 1931. In all four constituencies they conceded to National Liberal candidates. Whilst they pledged to put 'country before party' this arrangement, in the short term, was of mutual benefit. It gave the Tories a more positive image and allowed them to consolidate their finances, and afforded the Liberals the opportunity to contest the election without the prospect of the anti-socialist vote being divided. In the long term it is questionable whether such an understanding would have been beneficial to the Conservatives. A. H. Taylor has shown that in such instances it was the dominant parties which gained most, whereas the weaker ones tended to be



marginalised. In constituencies like Denbigh this proved to be the case. The Liberals were far stronger than the Conservatives. They continued to enjoy a distinct cultural advantage over their rivals. Only after the Liberals began to unravel –through problems of their own making – were the Conservatives able to make a decisive breakthrough.

In general the region's Conservatives welcomed their alliance with the Liberals. From the outset it was clear that the concept of a National Government and the sacrificing of the principle of Free Trade was tearing many Liberal associations apart. The divisions within their ranks could only be a positive development for the Tories. In no constituency was this better exemplified than Flintshire. In 1931 it was apparent that the National Liberal representative, Fred Llewellyn Jones, stood an excellent chance of being re-elected. He had emphatically defeated Goodman Roberts in 1929 and his popularity amongst the electorate was high. Furthermore since the election in 1929 he had proven himself to be a hardworking MP. In the meantime Goodman Roberts had left the Flintshire association, and had been replaced by Gwilym Rowlands.<sup>27</sup> Thus at this time the Conservatives were in disarray.

The Flintshire Conservative association welcomed Llewellyn Jones' support for the National Government. T. F. James, the North Wales organiser, was satisfied with his sincerity and commitment. In a letter to Major Hugh Peel, leader of the Maelor Tories, he reported:

‘We had a wonderful meeting at Shotton. Mr Llewellyn Jones quite satisfied the meeting on his support of the National Government including tariffs,

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<sup>26</sup> Of this total of 521, two MP's were National Irish politicians.

<sup>27</sup> Goodman Roberts stood down as the Flintshire Conservatives' candidate in December 1929.

economy, and other important questions.’<sup>28</sup>

Significantly it was the Conservatives as opposed to the Liberals who offered Llewellyn Jones the greatest support during the campaign. A few weeks prior to polling day his own constituency party had disassociated themselves from his candidacy. Whilst this was a personal blow to him, it afforded the Conservatives greater control over his political movements. Although it was common for factions within Liberal associations to oppose their candidate’s support for the National Government in North East Wales, such a drastic reaction was confined to Flintshire in 1931. Elsewhere both parties learnt to coexist with each other, albeit awkwardly. In Denbigh the Conservative association’s minutes reveal their initial reluctance to support Henry Morris-Jones’ candidacy. Since January 1931 the party had been hopeful that their new candidate, David Rhys, could capture the division from the Liberals.<sup>29</sup> Consequently the announcement that the two parties were to join forces disappointed many members:

‘Conservatism had made such great progress in the division in recent years, and the workers had brought about such change in public opinion by their self-sacrificing labours, that many of them were reluctant to waive the opportunity for a fight when their prospects of success were exceptionally good. But they, like others, were called upon to place their country before party.’<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> T. F. James to Hugh Peel, 14 October 1931, Bryn-y-Pys MS, D/BP/1018, FRO.

<sup>29</sup> David Rhys had represented the Denbigh division Conservatives in 1923. He was regarded as a strong candidate due to the fact that he was a local man and a Welsh speaker.

<sup>30</sup> Denbigh Division Conservative Association minutes, 10 October 1931, DD/DM/6, DRO.

The Wrexham Conservatives were equally dismayed. Since the early 1920s relations between themselves and the Liberals had been difficult. During the 1924 contest they had withdrawn their candidate to allow the Liberal, Christmas Williams, a clear fight against Labour's Robert Richards. However during that contest it was felt, in Tory circles, that their sacrifice had been inadequately recognised. Thus from this time onwards their relationship with the Liberals soured. Only reluctantly did they agree to support Aled O. Roberts' campaign in 1931. They could not justify standing against him following his pledge to support the National Government. In Montgomeryshire resentment was not present to the same degree. In essence the party had neither the appeal nor the resources to mount a serious challenge against the Liberals at this time. Whilst they were prepared to contest the election if the Liberals rejected the National Government, the return of Clement Davies as Liberal candidate convinced them not to venture a contest.

Significantly, all four National Liberal candidates were successfully returned to Parliament. Whilst Clement Davies and Henry Morris-Jones were unopposed, in Flintshire and Wrexham the Labour party mounted a challenge. Despite the recession, the prospect of reducing unemployment assistance and joining forces with capitalists was not an option favoured by the majority of members. Thus they were fully supportive of the national party's manifesto, *Labour's Call to Action: The Nation's Opportunity*, which claimed:

'The Labour Government was sacrificed to the clamour of Bankers and Financiers. Because it placed the needs of the workers before the demands of the rich, a so-called 'National' Government was installed in its place to wrest from

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Parliament the authority to satisfy them. The policy of that Government has proved a disastrous failure.’<sup>31</sup>

This strong sense of disappointment and anger was very much reflected within Labour circles in North Wales. T. C. Morris, the Welsh organiser, voiced his views at a meeting of the Wrexham Labour party. Rallying the members he said:

‘The heart of the movement is soured to the core at home and we shall require all the faith and allegiance of our people to withstand the fierce onslaught of our opponents in the near future.’<sup>32</sup>

At a subsequent meeting Robert Richards resolved to ‘support Mr. Henderson’ and provide a ‘relentless opposition to the National Government’.<sup>33</sup> Despite Richards’ determination and experience, though, he failed to convince the majority of the electorate of his party’s merits. Although he won a substantial proportion of the vote, over 20,000, Aled O. Roberts won by a margin of just under 2000.

The party also put up a strong campaign in Flintshire. Since 1918 Labour’s support had been gathering momentum. In every contest they had fought their share of the vote had consistently risen. The 1931 election was no exception. Huw T. Edwards, the Flintshire party’s election agent at the time, attributed this growth to the increasing political awareness of the division’s

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<sup>31</sup> Labour Party, Labour’s Call to Action: The Nation’s Opportunity, 1931, taken from F. W. S Craig, British General Election Manifestos, 1918-1966, Chichester 1966, p.68.

<sup>32</sup> Wrexham Trades Council and Divisional Labour Party minutes, 15 September 1931, DD/DM/344/3, DRO.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid, 25 September 1931.

industrial workers.<sup>34</sup> Although in September 1931 the divisional party were unsure whether to fight, their eventual campaign was a success. For the first time in Wales, outside the university seat, a female candidate represented the Labour cause. Frances Edwards arrived on Flintshire's political scene twenty-four hours before nominations closed.<sup>35</sup> Described by Huw T. Edwards as a 'bundle of Celtic fervour' she proved to be a 'first class candidate'.<sup>36</sup> Although only 24 years old, and a teacher from Manchester, she led an impassioned campaign. Warning of the inherent danger posed by the National Government, she claimed:

'As a convinced Socialist I appeal to all those who hate oppression and are revolted by the evil conditions in which our people pass their lives, to all people of good will, whatever their social station, to the poor and the exploited to register their vote this time and give Labour the opportunity to put its programme into operation. This Election is a Historic Election. Do your part.'<sup>37</sup>

Although Edwards made no secret of her socialist ideals, her manifesto also reveals a desire to attract the support of progressive liberals. Great emphasis was placed on her commitment to free trade and social reform. Nonetheless she was unable to surmount the challenge advanced by Fred Llewellyn Jones. What was happening nationally was too powerful. A Labour party tainted with failure and shifting sharply to the left faced a coalition that was fighting for the national interest. This was bound to attract Liberal support, since it accorded with so many Liberal principles. Yet in a constituency that boasted such a strong Liberal/ Conservative

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<sup>34</sup> H. T. Edwards, Hewn from the rock, Cardiff 1967, pp.98-99.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p.86.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>37</sup> Frances Edwards, election pamphlet, 1931, Bryn-y-Pys MS, D/BP/1018, FRO.

tradition, Edwards' poll was regarded as a triumph for Labour.<sup>38</sup> During this difficult time for the party she managed to attract over 16000 votes, a new record for the Flintshire party.

### 1932 – 1935

Following the 1931 contest a sense of disillusionment pervaded Labour ranks. The national party stood in ruins. Moreover the worsening economic climate meant that an increasing number of their core supporters were living with the consequences of mass unemployment and poverty. In Flintshire this period of stagnation and decline coincided with the permanent arrival of Huw T. Edwards on the political scene. Edwards was already acquainted with the constituency, having served as Frances Edwards' agent in 1931. Moreover he was also an experienced Labour activist in North Wales. He was a prominent member of the North Wales Labour Council and had also represented the party in local government. In August 1932 he was made an officer of the Shotton branch of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). The following year, shortly after the death of his boss W. H. Bennett, he was promoted and placed in charge of the union office. His arrival provided the constituency party with a huge boost. Although the divisional Labour association was not particularly active during the early 1930s, Edwards' efforts to encourage the party's development were successful. The constituency's occupational diversity had notoriously handicapped Labour's growth. Moreover the fact that many of the area's workers were not affiliated to a trade union meant the party was unable to influence the political views of a large number of the working classes through the usual means. One of Edwards' main objectives was to persuade one of the county's largest employers, Courtaulds, to relinquish their non-unionist policy. His eventual success meant that by the mid 1930s nearly all of the company's 4000 strong workforce had

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<sup>38</sup> H. T. Edwards, Hewn from the rock, op. cit, p87.

joined the TGWU.<sup>39</sup> This meant that the trade unions had a louder voice than ever before in Flintshire. Moreover, with the TGWU protecting the interests of such a large number of workers, Labour's prospects in the constituency was greatly improved.

Although Edwards succeeded in promoting the value of trade unionism this was not the experience of all the region's industrial leaders. Edward Jones' appointment as leader of the newly renamed NWBCMA (formerly NWMA) in 1934 brought about much confrontation. The numbers employed in the mining industry had fallen significantly since the late 1920s.<sup>40</sup> Although the NWBCMA's membership rates had remained fairly consistent throughout the mid to late 1930s they failed to reach anywhere near the 15,000 mark they boasted a decade earlier. See table 7.2:

Table 7.2

*Membership rates of the NWBCMA, 1933-1937*

| 1933 | 1934 | 1935 | 1936 | 1937 |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| 7381 | 7261 | 7330 | 8262 | 8060 |

Source: Annual reports of the NWMA, 1928-1932, D/NM/88-94

Increased mechanisation, the exhaustion of the area's mineral wealth, and the economic depression all contributed to this decline. To retain as much solidarity and strength possible amongst the remaining miners, Edward Jones announced his intention to ensure the full unionisation of the region's collieries. This decision led Jones into direct confrontation with

<sup>39</sup> H. T. Edwards, *Hewn from the rock*, op. cit, p.99.

<sup>40</sup> Keith Gildart, 'The Social and Political Development of the North Wales Miners, 1945-96', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of York, 1998, p.84.

the management of Flintshire's largest colliery, Point of Ayr. Since the end of 1926 the colliery's management had prevented its workers from joining a political union. This move coincided with their withdrawal from the North Wales Coal Owners Association. The controversy remained unresolved until April 1942, when the Court of Inquiry judged in favour of the NWBCMA's complaint. Thereafter the union was permitted access to the colliery to collect contributions.<sup>41</sup>

Whilst the nature of trade unionism in Flintshire changed during the 1930s, Labour was establishing a firmer footing for itself in this region. Slowly the party dispelled the myths projected by its opponents about its political ambitions. One way this was facilitated was through the growth of the Workers' Educational Association. Although the WEA was a non-political body, the emphasis it placed on opening up educational opportunities for all members of the community made its fundamental principles compatible with those of the Labour party. The ethos of the WEA very much contrasted with that of the Central Labour College movement in South Wales. Although both were respected educational bodies, the WEA steered away from the radicalism which was synonymous with the Central Labour Colleges. Moderation and respectability were its guiding principles, even though some local socialists led WEA classes. By the early 1930s Wrexham already had an established WEA university tutorial class. Since 1909 its predominantly working class students had been taught by the likes of R. H. Tawney and Robert Richards.<sup>42</sup> It fostered a sense of camaraderie amongst its

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<sup>41</sup> Sally Venn, 'Labour politics in North East Wales: A study of the North Wales Miners Association', Unpublished MA thesis, University of Wales Bangor, 1994, p.107.

<sup>42</sup> Ron Brooks, 'Rochdale, Wrexham and the university tutorial class movement in North-West Wales, 1907-1914', Welsh History Review, vol 20, June 2000.



students allowing them to broaden their horizons, and produced a labour leadership. Nonetheless for several decades this was the association's only branch in North East Wales.

The Flintshire class opened in 1933. Predictably Labour welcomed its inauguration, whilst the Conservatives were deeply suspicious of its formation. They argued that the political tendencies of the lecturers had the potential to influence students. Indeed at a meeting of the North Wales Tories, the Earl of Powis accused the WEA of trying to influence and corrupt young people through preaching the benefits of socialism.<sup>43</sup> In April 1933 the Flintshire Conservatives threatened to make a formal complaint to the government about the inherent danger posed by the association.<sup>44</sup> Speaking at a general meeting of the WEA Cyril O. Jones expressed his dismay at the attitude taken by the Tories. He insisted that politics had no place in education.<sup>45</sup> Yet arguably its presence did signify a desire to recruit white-collar workers and to provide an alternative economic and social outlook.

After 1931, the national party launched a series of combined membership and propaganda campaigns – notably the Million Members Campaign in 1932. In Wrexham the nature of Labour politics remained largely unchanged between 1932 and 1935, despite the new activism of the national party. The Wrexham party continued to take an active interest in the social problems that faced the electorate. Efforts to co-ordinate relief campaigns, protests against the means test and housing matters dominated their agenda. They took a keen interest in local matters, which was illustrated through their involvement with local government. Their presence in municipal, county, rural and urban elections was increasing, which was seen as an

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<sup>43</sup> Wrexham and North Wales Guardian, 23 January 1934.

<sup>44</sup> Flintshire Conservatives Association minutes, 25 April 1933, D/DM/307/2, FRO.

‘encouraging’ sign by party leaders.<sup>46</sup> The formation of a propaganda committee in June 1933 reaffirmed their determination to expand their political base. Improved organisation was seen as the key to their continued growth.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless whilst efforts were underway to permeate non-Labour circles, the association was concerned they were not retaining the interest of existing members. The party minutes reveal the disappointment felt when the results of an on-going membership scheme were announced (the party’s response to the Million Members Campaign). Although membership figures remained fairly consistent throughout the early 1930s, there was grave concern that political apathy was setting in:

‘The Secretary gave a report of his efforts in the Division to revive the interest of local parties with the membership scheme. Whilst the Division has not yet been cornered it was found that in all the parties already visited, a tremendous apathy and indifference existed almost everywhere in connection with this work.’<sup>48</sup>

Moreover the implications of the recession hit the Labour party hard. Many members were unable to pay their subscriptions fees. Inevitably the party was beset with financial difficulties. Subscriptions to the political fund rarely exceeded levels reached during the early 1920s. By late 1935 the party only managed to muster £34 in fees, less than the £35 raised in 1920.<sup>49</sup> Whilst the Wrexham party did not set the political trail blazing, and failed to advance any inspirational policies, its activists worked solidly during these years. It did not witness any

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<sup>45</sup> Wrexham and North Wales Guardian, 23 January 1934.

<sup>46</sup> Wrexham Trades Council and Divisional Labour Party minutes, 2 February 1932, DD/DM/344/3, DRO.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 2 June 1933.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 16 August 1932.

political controversies (unlike many local Labour parties in England), nor did it have to make any hard political choices, unlike the Liberal party. However their vision was limited. There is no evidence that they made any further efforts to expand the social basis of their support. Rather they focused on the needs of miners and their families.

On the other hand the Conservatives in North Wales underwent quite a reversal of fortunes during this period. By 1931 it seemed that their success had already peaked. When the Liberals were at their most effective, Tory efforts were frequently overshadowed. Yet as national issues increasingly dominated local political discussions, the region's Conservatives were seemingly spurred on by their growing resentment of their Liberal representatives. The alliance between the parties was rarely harmonious. Fred Llewellyn Jones and Aled O. Roberts were uncomfortable compromising their principles to support the National Government. Nonetheless for a considerable period they maintained their pledges to support it. However, following the Ottawa Conference they could no longer support the government. Their decision angered their respective Tory associations. Essentially they felt betrayed and bitter at being left without an MP who represented their interests. They felt both Jones and Roberts had ignored the wishes of the electorate who had voted them into office. In November 1932 Fred Llewellyn Jones was no longer recognised as the parliamentary representative of the Flintshire Conservatives. The *Flintshire Observer* summarised the association's position, which was expressed during a meeting of the regional party in January 1933:

'Flintshire was disappointed in its member, and he [Chairman of the North Wales

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid/DM/344/8, DRO. Financial statements, 1920-1937.

Conservatives, G. E. FitzHugh] thought that to be rightly so. There again, they had got a Liberal who had so far wandered from the path of strict Liberalism as to be unacceptable to his own supporters, and although he was returned to Parliament through the efforts of the Conservative Association, he had not only voted against the Government on the question of Ottawa – for which he might have claimed justification...but he also voted against them on a vote of censure on foreign policy, and for that there could be no excuse...Therefore, the Flintshire Conservatives were in no way bound to give their present member their support at the next Election...It was a rather funny position. He did not think that the Flintshire member's Liberal friends would want him back, and they would not like him very much, so that he would be rather a lone figure when the next general election came along.<sup>50</sup>

Through severing their ties with Llewellyn Jones the Conservatives were well aware of his political vulnerability. They had been unable to exert any influence over his judgements even though his own party had cut him adrift. The Liberals' subsequent reluctance to welcome him back into their fold provided the Conservatives with a huge boost. If Liberalism remained divided in the constituency they could capitalise on the vacuum of power that was emerging. Indeed by 1934 the *Flintshire Observer* noted the division's 'steady conversion from the emotional doctrines of palliative Liberalism to the sounder and saner ideals of a more practical Conservatism'.<sup>51</sup> Although the Conservatives had fallen into financial difficulties, they still managed to relaunch Gwilym Rowlands' candidacy. The *Flintshire Observer's* 'Watchman'

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<sup>5</sup> *Flintshire Observer*, 26 January 1933.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 February 1934.

asserted that the party was still in a very strong position. It estimated that the women's section alone had in excess of 3000 members scattered amongst the division's 34 branches.<sup>52</sup> A series of social events were arranged from May 1933 to ease the overdraft they had acquired and to reacquaint Rowlands with party activists and the division's electorate. Moreover in his annual speech in November 1933, the party's President emphasised the 'importance of reviewing party organisation in every polling district...with the object of tightening up existing organisation' and also to devote 'special attention' to districts where organisation was weak. Thus, the Conservatives were determined to recapture Flintshire.<sup>53</sup>

In Wrexham Aled O. Roberts' very public rejection of the government in early 1933 also angered the Tories. A great deal of resentment festered in their midst, as many members felt they had been consistently let down by the Liberals. In February 1933 the divisional women's section demanded:

'This meeting of the Women's Branch of Wrexham Division Conservative Association concludes that Mr. Aled Roberts, by his actions in joining the opposition has forfeited all rights to the support of the Conservative Association.'<sup>54</sup>

The formation of the constituency of Wrexham in 1918 had created a seat dominated by the mining industry, weakening Conservatives' prospects. Nonetheless their presence in parliamentary contests had been instrumental in challenging the Liberal vote, and allowing Labour to make its breakthrough. Consequently the termination of their association with Aled

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid, 6 April 1933.

<sup>53</sup> Flintshire Conservative Association minutes, 28 November 1933, D/DM/307/3, FRO.

O. Roberts had the potential to be very damaging for the Liberals – and a positive development for the Tories. When Liberal representatives from Wrexham and Flintshire withdrew their support for the National Government during the early 1930s, Conservative associations in both divisions were encouraged into action. Ironically the reverse was true in Denbigh and Montgomeryshire. Where Conservatives supported Liberal efforts they tended not to be so enthusiastic or energetic in their campaigning.

The position occupied by the Denbigh association was greatly envied by Conservatives elsewhere in North Wales. Henry Morris-Jones' relationship with his constituency Tory party was held up as the ideal by senior figures in the party. Indeed Wrexham's agent, J. M. Leah, paid tribute to Morris-Jones during a meeting of the regional party:

'I am [a] believer in die-hard Conservative policy, but I will sacrifice my principle for a Liberal candidate if he is the type of Dr. Morris Jones. On the other hand, I will not trouble to go and vote for a man who is a 'wobbler' like the one we had in Wrexham.'<sup>55</sup>

Whilst many Tories would have shared Leah's sentiments at the time, in the long term such an arrangement was not beneficial to the Denbigh Tories. The Conservative/ Liberal alliance could only benefit the dominant party in the relationship, and in this instance it was the Liberals. This was also true in Montgomeryshire. Significantly Conservative associations in both these seats spiralled deeper into financial difficulties and were less inclined to arrange

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<sup>54</sup> Wrexham Division Women's Section, 24 February 1933, NLW.

<sup>55</sup> Wrexham Leader, 17 January 1936.

social events as the 1930s progressed. The decline in the fortunes of the Denbigh Tories was swift. Throughout the 1930s their membership steadily fell, thus affecting their financial situation. Although their income from subscriptions remained relatively high their expenditure consistently exceeded this sum. For example, the financial report for the year ending December 1931 shows that they had an income of £834.2.3, yet in the same period they spent £965.17.11.<sup>56</sup> Consequently the party was forced to reconsider its priorities. In October 1932 their agent's salary was cut from £400 to £350 per annum. Moreover they were also forced to relinquish the services of their typist and sub-agent.<sup>57</sup> The following year they took out a 'Conservative loan' for £700 from Central Office in an attempt to clear their debts.<sup>58</sup> Whilst their financial difficulties subsided after 1933, they did not enjoy the same level of affluence they had done during the late 1920s.

The position of the Montgomeryshire Conservatives was even bleaker. The 1930s marked a period of depression and despondency within their ranks. They lacked the resources or the drive to continue challenging the dominance of the Liberal party. Presiding over the association's annual general meeting in 1933, Lord Powis was pessimistic about their future. Although it was reported that for the first time since they re-formed they had managed to erase their debt the party had seemingly lost its focus. Their improved financial standing was attributed to the fact that they no longer had an agent, and that they had not fielded a candidate in 1931.<sup>59</sup> However, without the guidance of a professional organiser to co-ordinate activities and harness political ambitions they were without direction. As a consequence they were

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<sup>56</sup> Denbigh Division Conservative association minutes, 20 January 1932, DD/DM/80 6, DRO. Although 1931 was an election year the Conservatives did not finance a candidate.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid, 24 October 1932.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid, 22 March 1933.

reduced to a minority group within the division. Despite their efficiency drive their balance stood at only £17 in 1933.<sup>60</sup> Their treasurer, Major Lomax, announced that in view of this predicament their activities had to be limited. In a final bid to re-ignite interest in the party the association called upon activists to arrange a series of friendly and informal meetings in their local communities to promote Conservatism.<sup>61</sup>

Political apathy played a large part in the downfall of the Montgomeryshire Conservative party. This was a problem that the division's Liberal and Labour associations were also familiar with. Indeed by the 1930s only the Liberals remained a credible political force in the constituency. The Conservatives only thrived during the inter-war period when its activists were inspired to quash the Liberal party's influence. Throughout the 1920s David Davies' inactivity and unsatisfactory parliamentary representation had imbued the association with the hope that they could win the seat. However Clement Davies' support for the National Government brought this momentum to a halt. Thus the Tories, like their Labour counterparts some years earlier, momentarily gave up the fight. They were penalised for not remaining focused on policy and allowing organisational matters to slip. The appeal of being 'above party' had been harnessed by the Liberals – not claimed by the Tories (as they had done elsewhere).

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<sup>59</sup> Montgomeryshire Express, 24 January 1933.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*



### The 1935 Election

The outright political victors of the inter-war years were the Conservatives. During the 1930s, in particular, they went from strength to strength, whilst their opponents' appeal diminished. By 1935 the Liberal party was in terminal decline and Labour continued to be deeply divided. Thus, the Tories capitalised on their position. Whilst the National Government had weakened other parties, it had bolstered their own support in many seats across the UK, allowing them to mop up Liberal support. Following the election of this year 387 Tory MP's were returned to Parliament. Labour's comeback was modest. They could only muster 154 MP's. The Liberals managed to win only 21 seats. The image constructed by the Conservatives was one of prudence, moderation, reliability and caution – all qualities which were, arguably, embodied in the person of Stanley Baldwin.<sup>62</sup>

In North East Wales the result of the 1935 election highlighted the political transformation which the area had undergone since 1931. It also reflected, on a small scale, the achievements and problems encountered by the national parties. Whilst Labour began to regain its standing, the decline of the Liberal party was clearly demonstrated. Yet to a large extent it was the Tories who proved to be the most influential party in North East Wales during this contest. Although electorally they did not dominate, the voting behaviour of their supporters influenced the outcomes of the majority of contests. By this time only two of the region's Liberal MP's had remained true to the National Government. Significantly, the policies they espoused were diluted with Conservative rhetoric. The Denbigh Conservatives were

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<sup>62</sup> P. Williamson, Stanley Baldwin. A conservative leadership and national values, Cambridge 1999.

unrelenting in their admiration and support for Henry Morris-Jones. In July 1935 the following resolution was passed during a meeting of the Conservative Central Council:

‘This meeting of the Denbigh Division Conservative Association desires to express its high appreciation of the manner in which Dr. Morris-Jones has continued to support the National Government, and assures him, of its active co-operation and support.’<sup>63</sup>

The contest that ensued confirmed Morris-Jones’ Tory credentials. His own party’s renunciation of him and the presence of J. C. Davies (the constituency’s former Liberal MP) in the election reassured right-wing sympathisers of his sincerity. Although his return to Parliament was by no means a formality, as Davies proved to be a formidable opponent, Conservative support was an important factor in his victory. This was also the case in Wrexham and Flintshire. In Wrexham, Aled O. Roberts stood for re-election in 1935, having broken with the National Government. The Liberals were confident of his success as without a Tory candidate to divide the anti-socialist vote their prospects appeared rosy. However this was not to be the case. Prior to polling day the divisional Conservative association appealed to their members to abstain from voting. Whilst not all Conservative branches in the constituency agreed with this measure, the Penycae party is one such example, this decision could have influenced some supporters.<sup>64</sup> Turnout reached only 75.5 percent in 1935, compared with 79.8 per cent in 1931 and 84.9 per cent in 1929.

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<sup>63</sup> Denbigh Division Conservative Association, 22 July 1935, D/DM/80/6, DRO.

<sup>64</sup> Penycae Conservative association minutes, 11 November 1935, NLW.

Although the behaviour of both the Wrexham and Denbigh Conservative associations impacted on the eventual result of the contest, they themselves had little realistic hope of returning their own candidate to Parliament. In Flintshire the situation was different. For the second time since 1918 the party had every reason to be confident of success. Following the resignation of Fred Llewellyn Jones, victory seemed to be within their grasp. From 1933 the party had been busily preparing for the contest. Their candidate, Gwilym Rowlands, had conducted an exhaustive tour of the division. Moreover a series of social events was arranged to introduce him to activists and potential voters. The preparations of the Overton Conservative association show that little was left to chance. In July 1935 the regional agent, T. F. James, wrote to their executive committee reminding them to target newly qualified voters. Each branch party was instructed to compile an intricate list of electors in their area.<sup>65</sup> Yet although the Tories invested much time and resources into their campaign, in many respects the contest reflected the Liberals' demise. They had apparently lost touch with the needs of their electorate. The brand of Liberalism espoused by J. E. Emlyn Jones was too radical and unpalatable for the majority of voters. The radical image projected made even Labour appear conservative in comparison. Thus, the Conservatives were the beneficiaries of the power vacuum left by the Liberals.

In January 1936 Gwilym Rowlands attempted to explain why the National Government had triumphed in Flintshire. He argued that many voters had been persuaded of the benefits of protectionism. Unlike the Wrexham area, Flintshire's industries had witnessed an upturn by the mid 1930s. Unemployment had fallen and greater prosperity had returned to the region. This was an ideal advert for the Government, a point which was not lost on the likes of

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<sup>65</sup> T. F. James to Hugh Peel (Overton Chairman), 15 July 1935, Bryn-y-Pys MS, D/ BP/1018, FRO.

Goronwy Owen (Lloyd George's son-in-law, see chapter 5). Writing in the *Home and Empire* journal, Rowlands wrote:

'...the National Government not only aims at improving the condition of the people, but also is capable of "delivering the goods". In my own constituency, Flintshire, I found that this lesson had been well learnt. It could hardly have been otherwise. Among my constituents were 4000 men now employed in a steelworks who were idle in 1931. In that year the wages bill of the firm was £500,000. This year they are almost certain to reach the £1,000,000 mark. Under protection, unemployment in Flintshire has been reduced by almost half since 1931.'<sup>66</sup>

Some of the area's most prominent industrialists publicly applauded the government's policy. Geoffrey Summers, director of the county's largest employer and coincidentally the president of the division's Conservative association, enthusiastically said 'their [the government] policy made a tremendous difference in the county, especially to the steel industry'.<sup>67</sup> Prior to the introduction of 'safeguarding' measures Flintshire's unemployment levels had been on a par with South Wales and other distressed areas. Table 1.8 illustrates this point.<sup>68</sup> One of the main causes for these high figures at the start of the 1930s had been the compulsory redundancy of over four thousand men who worked for the John Summers company. However, between 1932 and 1937 the numbers out of work dramatically reduced. The success of the economic measures severely undermined Liberal demands for a return to Free Trade - their *raison d'être*.

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<sup>66</sup> Gwilym Rowlands, 'Conservatism for the Working Man', *Home and Empire*, January 1936, p.6.

<sup>67</sup> Flintshire Conservative Association minutes, 10 April 1937, D/DM/307 4, FRO.

<sup>68</sup> Table 1.8 (Chapter 1) illustrates the fact that unemployment figures in Flintshire declined from 28.7 per cent in 1933 to 14.5 per cent in 1937. The introduction of tariffs benefited the county's steel manufacturers.

In practical terms their credibility was compromised, whereas the Conservatives' policy was both justified and vindicated and their position was further strengthened.

The only constituency in North East Wales not to be influenced or manipulated by the Conservative party was Montgomeryshire. Whilst the Denbigh Conservatives swooned in admiration of their candidate, by 1935 their Montgomeryshire counterparts had become an almost invisible force in the constituency. Despite the fact that Clement Davies was returned unopposed to Westminster, the Tories would have struggled had they opposed him. Their desperate financial situation and limited political activity severely handicapped them. Nonetheless with regard to North Wales as a whole Montgomeryshire was by no means an exception. Addressing a meeting of the regional party in January 1936 J. M. Leah passed the following resolution:

‘...the time is now opportune to consider seriously the absence of Conservative candidates in certain constituencies in Wales, and that urgent steps be taken as soon as possible to consider this important matter by the Wales and Monmouthshire Council, and that a strong representative committee from all parts of Wales be asked to sit and report on this matter.’<sup>69</sup>

The Conservatives did not make an obvious impression on North Wales during the inter-war years. They tasted parliamentary success only twice, and on both occasions their candidate represented Flintshire. Central party initiatives spread to the area, but not consistently. Nor were these ideas always adopted on the ground. By the mid 1930s divisional associations were

at least able to recognise where their support lay and realistically evaluate their chances of success. This was also true in the case of the Labour party. The party had made little headway in the agricultural constituencies of Montgomeryshire and Denbigh. Even though they contested the Denbigh division in 1935, J. Roberts Hughes was unable to attract the same kind of following as his Liberal rivals. It was the region's industrial areas that the Labour party focused on and developed, despite attempts in 1925-9 to broaden the party's appeal. Whatever was happening at national level – and despite long-standing desires to capture rural seats – local and regional parties never had the capacity or the motivation to secure their loyalty. In the 1930s, the party seemed to turn inwards and focus on 'core' supporters.

Similarly to their Liberal rivals, the Wrexham Labour party had been preparing for the 1935 contest for some time. Social functions, public meetings and the continued drive to increase membership had figured prominently in their activities since 1933. Nonetheless it is significant that only the Labour party devoted much attention to the social problems plaguing the area. This concern was reflected in Robert Richards' campaign. In the aftermath of the Gresford colliery disaster of September 1934, he was acutely aware of the tension and misery that had been developing in the division's mining communities. He emphasised the need to reduce unemployment and to improve the conditions of employment for the working classes – particularly miners. His ability to connect with the electorate's needs was an important factor in his eventual victory. Nevertheless the Conservatives also played their part in ensuring his success. He was the beneficiary of Tory appeals not to vote Liberal.

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<sup>69</sup> Wrexham Leader, 17 January 1936.

Whilst the Conservatives had little hope of challenging Labour in Wrexham, in Flintshire the situation was different. Both parties recognised the potential of this constituency. Its social, occupational and cultural diversity meant that once either party found themselves an electoral base their support could grow. Labour fielded one of its strongest candidates. Cyril O. Jones had stood once before in 1929; thus he was a recognisable figure in the division. Since 1922 Labour's share of the vote had been steadily rising. It was hoped following efforts to unionise the constituency's workers that the party's popularity would have further increased. They were not disappointed. Despite the fact that Labour finished in their customary third position, the party's vote was higher than ever before. Significantly Jones only trailed the Liberals by around 400 votes. Thus the 1935 contest not only signalled the demise of the Liberal party; it also pointed to the ascendancy of Labour – less, perhaps, through further Labour progress than through further Liberal collapse.

### Conclusion

The early 1930s was a time of immense uncertainty and insecurity for all three parties. The natural inclination of local activists to deal with organisation and policy was reinforced by the confusion and divisions created by national political changes. To varying degrees each party encountered problems regarding their financial situation and were concerned that apathy was spreading amongst their ranks. The Liberals and Conservatives shouldered an additional burden. The formation of the National Government in August 1931 forced constituency associations into uneasy alliances. Such arrangements had the potential to destabilise either party. In Flintshire, in particular, the impact on Liberalism as a political force was devastating. Significantly during this period guidance and assistance from their respective headquarters in

London was also conspicuously absent. Each divisional party was largely left alone to deal with their own difficulties as they saw fit. Whilst this was not unusual in the case of the Labour party, for the Conservatives it was. The initial help they received from Central Office during the 1920s was not in such plentiful supply. Despite the fact that they still enjoyed greater privileges than their political rivals, in terms of using the cinema vans and being privy to loans from Central Office, associations like Montgomeryshire struggled to remain focused. Labour was going through ideological and policy turmoil. The Liberals were unsure about Liberalism. For the Conservatives 'nation above party' was a powerful rhetoric; but it could not be used to attack 'nationally' minded Liberals. Thus Central Office could do little to spread a message which would help the Tories in North East Wales.

Nonetheless, and regardless of political affiliation, it was the most active associations which experienced the greatest success – even in the face of adversity. They tended to be more alert as to the needs of the electorate at grassroots level. In part the achievements of the Wrexham Labour party and the Flintshire Conservatives can be attributed to this factor. The political terrain of North East Wales could be difficult and hostile. Success was increasingly influenced by a party's attempts to win support. Old cultural affiliations and family traditions no longer automatically determined victory; old allegiances had to be reaffirmed in a new world, and the Liberals often failed to do this. National politics had finally reached the region by 1935, which meant that each party had to fight for their support and their political survival. This region continued to lag behind national trends – but with the accelerated pace of social and demographic change it was rapidly catching up.



## *Epilogue and Conclusion*

On a national level the 1935 election truly marked the demise of the Liberal party. The party had become a mere shadow of its former self. In a period of less than twenty years its parliamentary representation had been reduced by hundreds. The Liberals' glory days were over. Between 1918 and 1935 the nature of society and politics had undergone considerable change. Whilst attempts had been made to acknowledge the electorate's new demands – most notably in 1929 – by the mid 1930s internal feuding prevented the party from offering a credible alternative to the Conservatives and Labour. The divisions that had been apparent within the Liberal party since 1916 had progressively weakened their resolve. Whilst these splits were only initially apparent on a national level, the corrosive effect they eventually had on constituency organisations proved to be devastating. The impact of the 1931 crisis, in particular, was enough to tear many divisional associations apart, and take others to the brink of collapse. If party members themselves were unclear of the ideological boundaries of Liberalism it is unsurprising that increasingly the electorate lost patience, particularly if they found their interests better represented by another party.

Nonetheless parts of North Wales remained faithful to the party. Indeed this region was considered to be one its last bastions. Even in the aftermath of the 1945 election four out of the eight constituencies in North Wales returned Liberals, and it was not until the 1950s that seats such as Merioneth and Caernarfon went Labour.<sup>1</sup> Amongst those seats which rejected the party following the Second World War were Flintshire and Wrexham. Neither seat returned a Liberal after 1935. Yet even in these constituencies the Liberals refused to accept total defeat. This is best illustrated in Flintshire, where individuals such as Thomas Waterhouse and Gomer Owen continued to promote the party and assume an active role

within the community – even if their ideas were not in line with most of the electorate’s by this time. They failed to appreciate that material considerations came before political principle for the majority of the division’s voters. Since the mid 1930s Flintshire’s economic problems had subsided. Whilst in Wrexham unemployment was caused by structural factors, in Flintshire it was of a cyclical nature. Consequently the National Government’s policy of protection was perceived in a positive light in the local press. Whilst a Liberal party that espoused government policies was still an electable commodity, Liberalism in its purest form was not. Free trade had lost much of its appeal following the crisis of 1931. Nevertheless the Flintshire Liberal association refused to give up the fight. During the late 1930s its activists were as committed as ever to their cause. They did not lose their desire and motivation to organise their ranks efficiently. Reflecting upon their position in 1936, the association’s executive committee emphasised the need to consolidate their support.<sup>2</sup> The party remained outwardly confident that success was still within its reach and continued in its endeavours to arrange social functions within the constituency. Rather than throwing in their lot with Labour, the National Government or the Popular Front, they remained wedded to the ‘pure’ cause.

The nature and actions of the Montgomeryshire Liberals starkly contrasted with this outlook. Ironically, here party members were far more disheartened than their Flintshire counterparts. In August 1936 the secretary of the divisional association reviewed the party’s activities for the year in his annual report. In his view the situation was one of great concern. He noted that even members of the executive committee were doubtful of the party’s standing in the constituency.<sup>3</sup> The unopposed return of their Member to

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<sup>1</sup> Anglesey, Denbigh, Merioneth, and Montgomeryshire.

<sup>2</sup> Flintshire Liberal Association minutes, 28 April 1936, D/DM/350, FRO.

<sup>3</sup> Montgomeryshire Liberal Association minutes, 29 August 1936, NLW.

Westminster did not have a positive impact on the division's political activity. The party chairman, Edward Jones, asked:

‘ What can we do to revive interest and secure support? The present lack of interest was a symptom. He thought more socials, and more meetings and to get Mrs Davies there...’<sup>4</sup>

Clement Davies' lengthy absences from his constituency meant that the divisional association's most prominent member was rarely seen supporting the Liberal cause in Montgomeryshire. Parliamentary work increasingly called him away. His wife, Jano, was occasionally required to deputise for him at social functions and meetings. From 1935 onwards Davies quickly rose to prominence at Westminster. Between 1937 and 1939 he chaired a commission inquiring into the incidence and causes of tuberculosis in Wales. Later in 1939 he chaired the All-party Group in Parliament, whose influence contributed to the downfall of Neville Chamberlain and the promotion of Winston Churchill. Yet Clement Davies' rising public profile did little to resolve the difficulties his divisional party was facing. Apathy amongst the electorate remained an unresolved problem throughout this period. In December 1938 the party minutes record the views of the organising secretary, T. Bowen:

‘...he had been in personal touch with Liberals throughout the county and had visited Welshpool, Montgomery, Credway and district, Guilsfield, Llanidloes, Carno and Machynlleth, but that he had found a feeling of apathy and indifference towards politics in most districts. He stated that many of the people whom he

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

approached had offered help, but were looking to the Association to give a lead by declaring its policy. The Organiser also stated that he had found that the Liberals in the county were not united in their views...that the task of resuscitating the local associations would be a most difficult one'.<sup>5</sup>

The Montgomeryshire Liberals were deeply divided over support for the National Government. In contrast to their Flintshire counterparts, who were committed to a radical political path (and were also a unified force during the late 1930s) the Montgomeryshire party remained in a state of confusion. The result was minimal political activity. Consequently the outlook was bleak. Money was in short supply. They had an overdraft of £143, and by this stage were reliant on Clement Davies to keep them afloat financially. Between November 1931 and 1936 he contributed £1351 to the constituency party.<sup>6</sup> The divisional association's support for the National Government also continued to frustrate many activists. The opposition of the Machynlleth and Llanidloes Liberals to supporting the National Government was well-known. However by 1938 the county's former MP, David Davies, also began to articulate his feelings of disillusionment with the government.

David Davies was convinced of the need to form a 'United Front' from the progressive forces in Britain, as he objected to the appeasement policies pursued by Chamberlain. Primarily concerned with the League of Nations in the 1920s, he was one of many Liberals to whom the survival of certain Liberal principles seemed more important than the survival of the Liberal party. In a letter to Anthony Eden in November 1938 he violently condemned the tactics of government, and wrote of the benefits an alliance of progressive

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Montgomeryshire Liberal Association minutes, 29 August 1936, NLW.

forces would bring.<sup>7</sup> Clement Davies' prolonged absences from his constituency meant that a power vacuum had been allowed to develop. As a result his predecessor reassumed a prominent position within the party and had enough influence to steer the association towards his own wishes. It was he who chaired the meeting in December 1938 that moved a resolution against their continued support of the National Government. Such an attempt to undermine his authority incensed Clement Davies. Viewing David Davies' actions as part of a conspiracy against him, he wrote to David Davies from West Africa calling his actions 'childish' and 'babyish'.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore in a letter to his wife Jano, Clement Davies claimed that David Davies was 'playing dirty and holding the Liberal Caucus while I am away in Africa'. Nonetheless he was defiant: 'I may be in Africa but my name, my record and my voice still remains in Montgomery'.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately David Davies' efforts to undermine his successor were thwarted. As in many other constituency parties, the outbreak of the Second World War halted internal feuding. To a large extent the war forced the Montgomeryshire Liberals to consider their position. They had managed to hold on for so long before 1939 because they were accepted by other parties as an unbeatable force – unbeatable because they reflected local values and culture, not because people necessarily supported Liberal politics. Despite the fact that their political opponents had evaporated, the Liberals were themselves in danger of disintegrating during the 1930s. Apathy had already eroded the position of the constituency's Labour and Conservative parties. Yet by the end of 1942 the Liberals were once again united. In August 1942 two important resolutions were passed. Firstly the local

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<sup>7</sup> David Davies to Anthony Eden, 9 November 1938, Llandinam MS, NLW. In his support for a 'United Front' David Davies was consistent. His support for Vernon Bartlett who stood as an Independent Progressive in Bridgewater, Dr. Mabel Tylecot in Flyde and the Duchess of Atholl who stood as an Independent in Perthshire and Kinross-shire underlines his commitment to this cause.

<sup>8</sup> Clement Davies to David Davies, 3 January 1939, Clement Davies MS, I/1/4, NLW.

<sup>9</sup> Clement Davies to Jano Davies, 3 January 1939, Clement Davies MS, I/1/5, NLW.

party sought re-affiliation with the Liberal party, and secondly they sought to rejoin the North Wales Liberal Federation.<sup>10</sup> The Montgomeryshire Liberals were fortunate that another party did not fill the political vacuum that emerged during the 1930s. There was a unique situation that was not replicated in any other constituency in North East Wales.

Elsewhere in the region opposition to the Liberals was mounting. By 1939 the Labour party had made significant advances in both Wrexham and Flintshire. In Wrexham the divisional association's emphasis continued to be focused on the 'consolidation' of their position. From 1936 onwards its party leaders were more concerned than ever before with their performance and representation in local government. Their greatest priority during this period was the selection of suitable municipal candidates and the appointment of a committee to draft election policies.<sup>11</sup> It was one thing to represent the constituency at a parliamentary level, but another to make a breakthrough locally. Their efforts were eventually rewarded. Although the party could not yet win as many seats as the Liberals and Conservatives, their progress was gradual and positive, as the 1937 borough council results testified. The triennial county council election results, in 1937, saw Labour win over a quarter of Denbighshire's seats. More and more of the 'Liberal' constituency was turning to other parties.

Elsewhere, other issues were used to extend the Labour party's appeal. European political instability was the source of much debate and concern. The rise of fascism was perceived as a threat to civilised society, and indicative of the dangers which militaristic might and nationalist fervour presented to democracy. It was a moral cause. Nonetheless in comparison to other Welsh constituencies the Wrexham party did not immerse itself in the

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<sup>10</sup> Montgomeryshire Liberal Association minutes, 8 August 1942, NLW.

radical spirit of the anti – Fascist crusade. Fundraising activities were minimal. In 1937 they only managed to raise just over £13 for the Basque Children’s Fund<sup>12</sup>, whereas in a door-to-door campaign in Swansea the party collected nearly £300 for Spanish Aid Relief.<sup>13</sup> This was by no means an extremist party. The Wrexham party’s brand of practical socialism did not bond with the revolutionary doctrines of the far left. The divisional party had no links with the Communist party. Indeed only the Llay Labour association displayed any far left tendencies. In April 1937 they lodged a complaint about the national party’s disaffiliation of the Socialist League.<sup>14</sup> Thus a revitalisation evident elsewhere – and an attractive cause to some middle class Liberals – was less evident in Wrexham.

Despite the party’s continued activity in the community, it is significant to note that it also failed to attract a strong female following. Again, methods used elsewhere were absent in Wrexham. In this respect both the Liberals and the Conservatives overshadowed Labour. Yet the Wrexham association’s record in this area was by no means exceptional. The reports compiled by the regional women’s organiser, Elizabeth Andrews, reveal that in general Labour groups throughout North East Wales were neglecting the organisation of women. At a meeting of the Wrexham Central Committee (Women’s Section) Andrews lamented that only five women were present to discuss the arrangements for a joint conference to be organised by the Labour Women and Co-operative Guilds in early 1939.<sup>15</sup> Moreover she was struck by the timid nature of many of the females present, when she suggested that they should invite Robert Richards to speak at the conference. Andrews noted:

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<sup>11</sup> Wrexham Divisional Labour Party minutes, 10 November 1936 & 8 December 1936, DD/DM/344/5, DRO.

<sup>12</sup> Wrexham Divisional Labour Party, Financial Report, 31 December 1937, DD/DM/344/8, DRO

<sup>13</sup> D. M. Tanner, ‘The pattern of Labour politics, 1918-1939’, in D. M. Tanner, C. Williams & D. Hopkin (eds), *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900-2000*, Cardiff 2000, p.129.

<sup>14</sup> Wrexham Divisional Labour Party minutes, 27 April 1927, DD/DM/344/5, DRO.

‘The Secretary was very reluctant to write [to] Mr. Richards, because he had never responded to any previous request, so I promised that I would write [to] him personally and let him know what the women were doing on this matter.’<sup>16</sup>

The committee’s reluctance to correspond directly with Robert Richards is significant as it implies his disinterest in the activities of his own constituency’s women’s section. Once again, the shifts in political approaches identified by historians of national politics and of other areas are not distinguishable in North East Wales.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless Richards’ disinclination to support their endeavours was neither unique nor surprising. During the inter-war period this sort of attitude was not uncommon. Pamela Graves observes:

‘In the absence of pressure from women members, the party could safely ignore women as a distinct group. As a result they ceased to exist in NEC deliberations or policy formulation... The women’s conferences was little more than a ‘talking shop’ where women delegates were reduced to commenting on decisions already made or about to be made by the male-dominated party conference.’<sup>18</sup>

Wrexham Labour party was not under pressure (from members or from the need to win votes) and did not react. Many labour activists regarded the discussion of ‘female matters’ as being potentially divisive. They were anxious that if women developed an agenda that compromised their own beliefs, the party might be divided along gender lines.

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<sup>15</sup> Organiser’ report (Elizabeth Andrews), 9 December 1937, LP/WORG/37/230, LPA.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> For example, the political changes outlined by Mike Savage in his study of Preston do not reflect the situation in North East Wales.

<sup>18</sup> Pamela Graves, Labour Women, Women in British Working-class politics, 1918-1939, Cambridge 1994, p.216.



Consequently Mary Sutherland, the chief women's organiser from 1932, insisted that women's sections focus on generic matters which concerned the working classes as whole. Whilst women's groups were stifled by the party's male culture some local female activists attributed their lack of success to insufficient guidance and support from head office in London. In October 1937 Miss G. Williams, chairwoman of the Ponciau association, wrote to Sutherland:

'They [Ponciau branch members] feel that the Women's Sections in North Wales should be more active than they are, and that if North Wales had an organiser of its own, it would help create an enthusiasm in the Sections already functioning, and would be the means of forming sections where they do not exist at present.'<sup>19</sup>

Certainly Elizabeth Andrews' professional time was in short supply. In total she oversaw the activities of 36 constituencies. Nevertheless Sutherland, in her reply to Williams, was adamant that organisers could only 'guide and encourage and advise and suggest...they cannot do the work which the local comrades must do'.<sup>20</sup> The Wrexham party failed to attract a strong female following, even though many women would have been already acquainted with the party through the affiliation of male relatives either as individual or union members.

By contrast the Flintshire section had a far stronger presence in its constituency despite the fact that there were fewer female members.

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<sup>19</sup> Miss G. Williams to Mary Sutherland, 17 November 1937, LP/WORG/37/232, LPA.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Sutherland to Miss G. Williams, 18 November 1937, LP/WORG/37/231, LPA.

Table 8.1

North East Wales female membership of the Labour party, 1933 – 1945

| <i>Constituency</i> | <i>1933</i> | <i>1934</i> | <i>1935</i> | <i>1936</i> | <i>1937</i> | <i>1938</i> |
|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <i>Denbigh</i>      | 120         | 120         | 120         | 100         | 88          | 80          |
| <i>Flint</i>        | 147         | 124         | 172         | 171         | 100         | 160         |
| <i>Wrexham</i>      | 169         | 211         | 187         | 246         | 244         | 172         |
| <i>Montgomery</i>   | 60          | 120         | 60          | 60          | 60          | 60          |

Source: D. M. Tanner, C. Williams & D. Hopkin, *The Labour party in Wales, 1900-2000*, Cardiff 2000.

According to Elizabeth Andrews, the Labour women of Flintshire took a more active role in politics, even though official figures show that they were a smaller group in comparison to Wrexham. Local branches tended to be far better represented in organisational meetings. Andrews estimated that between 60 and 70 of the division's women were present at a conference held at Leeswood in November 1937.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore she notes that during a rally held in Rhyl, in which 52 women attended, 'several' Liberal women were present.<sup>22</sup> The fact that Flintshire was the first ordinary constituency in Wales to field a female Labour candidate, Frances Edwards, is significant. As the party was still establishing its foundations in the community, it would have been more likely than the Wrexham division to incorporate new ideas and strategies into its organisational plans. Labour had to offer a broader appeal due to the diverse nature of the seat. Given the mounting dangers evident after 1936, this could even mean co-operating with the Liberal party. The Flintshire Liberals themselves were conscious of the dangers of dividing the progressive vote, but as they perceived themselves to be the stronger of the two parties it was their assertion that it should be Labour who bowed down to their candidate. By 1939 the divisional party were adamant that the prospective Labour candidate, W. J. Rees, should withdraw in any future parliamentary contest.<sup>23</sup> However, 'Popular Front' activism was hardly evident in the seat

<sup>21</sup> Organiser' report (Elizabeth Andrews), 4 November 1937, LP/WORG/37/242, LPA.

<sup>22</sup> Organiser' report (Elizabeth Andrews), 25 May 1937, LP/WORG/37/244, LPA.

<sup>23</sup> Flintshire Liberal Association minutes, 13 April 1939.

because both parties felt they could win, and both felt an alliance would compromise their principles. Instead Labour adopted a mix of policy issues which reflected the national party's progressive aims and the need to win moderate votes.

Frustration and anxiety pervaded many Conservative circles during the latter part of the 1930s. Their fortunes in this region were mixed. Whilst the Montgomeryshire Conservatives had virtually disappeared from the political scene by this time, other divisional associations were thriving. This was very much the case in Flintshire. In April 1937 the party's parliamentary representative, Gwilym Rowlands, 'doubted whether there were many political organisations which could record such intense political activities in one year as that the Association had done'.<sup>24</sup> This was a time of transition in a constituency where a power struggle was emerging between Labour and the Liberals; both were vying to be the party of the 'left'. As a consequence the Tories were able to capitalise on the political vacuum that was developing, and portray themselves as the party of prosperity and stability. This was an image frequently projected by Gwilym Rowlands. His article in the *Home and Empire* journal in 1936 attributed both the country's and his own constituency's improving economic conditions directly to the National Government. In his mind the revival vindicated the government's protectionist stance. He emphasised the benefits of Conservatism for the ordinary 'working man' and his family, reinforcing the image of the party as an inclusive body which represented all interests. He argued:

'The last two elections have at least shown us one thing very clearly. It is that the working men and women of this country have begun to realise that the Socialist Party have no monopoly of sympathy for the "underdogs". That the lesson will, I

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<sup>24</sup> Flintshire Conservative Association minutes, 10 April 1937, D/DM/307/4, FRO.

feel sure, be learned still more fully by the workers after another period of a National Government. Mr. Baldwin has defined for us the three-fold basis of Conservatism. Our creed rests...on the maintenance of the Constitution, the development of the Empire, and the improvement of the condition of the people. This is a creed that the working man can believe in. He can be a Conservative so long as there is no backsliding from the last of those three principles.’<sup>25</sup>

In a constituency like Flintshire it was vital that the party’s appeal extended well beyond the confines of the upper and middle classes. The Tories’ success in 1924 and 1935 proved that they were capable of achieving this goal. It is significant that they did not relent in their efforts. They never lost sight of the fact that they needed a visible presence in the division, and certainly their victory in 1935 did not make them complacent. Meetings continued to be held on a regular basis. The association was even more determined than ever to ensure political success. Having secured parliamentary success from the clutches of the Liberals, their next move was to consolidate and cultivate an even stronger base of support. Their strategy was twofold.

Continued expansion in local politics was seen as the key. The aim was to further locate themselves at the heart of the community. As early as June 1936 discussions of the executive committee revolved around the importance of selecting suitable candidates for the county council elections the following year.<sup>26</sup> Equally important was ensuring that every seat was contested. The second part of the strategy was to promote the Unionist Labour Movement. Flintshire is the only known Conservative association in North East Wales to have supported the development of Central Office’s attempt to form a trade

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<sup>25</sup> G. Rowlands, ‘Conservatism for the working man’, *Home and Empire*, January 1936.

<sup>26</sup> Flintshire Liberal Association minutes, 13 June 1936, DM/350, FRO

union. Indeed it was one of the few nationwide to respond to this initiative. The aim was to attract more working class people to their ranks, and directly challenge the threat of Labour. The official literature from Central Office explains the purpose of establishing labour advisory committees:

‘The Conservative Party is democratic in the widest sense of that term... But it is handicapped if it does not recognise the outlook of the wage-earners, and makes special provision for its political expression. A great legislative record and programme are not sufficient. The Socialist Party gives special attention to the *individual*, and the Conservative Party must do the same. The capture of Trade Unionism, the fight to dominate the Co-operative Movement, the influence of Shop Stewards, Checkweighmen and the like, and the usurpation of the credit of Social Benefits and Services, such as Unemployment and Health Insurance and Widows and Old Age Pensions, are some of the “non-political” means whereby the Socialist Party establishes its influence over the individual wage-earner. To check this, the Conservative Party must be prepared to specialise.’<sup>27</sup>

Despite these good intentions Stuart Ball observes that in practice many divisional associations were hostile to this idea during the 1930s. They viewed the establishment of these advisory committees as a potential threat to the *status quo*, and feared that local Conservative associations would be overrun by the working classes.<sup>28</sup> Such sentiments were not manifested in Flintshire. Like Labour, the Conservatives were desperate to broaden their appeal. This was precisely the way in which they could make themselves a

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<sup>27</sup> Conservative Party publication, ‘Conservative and Unionist Labour Advisory Committees: What they are and what they do’, n.d. (c. 1938), FRO, D/DM/307/10.

<sup>28</sup> S. Ball, ‘Local Conservatism and the evolution of the party organisation’ in A. Seldon & S. Ball *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party since 1900*, Oxford 1994, p.276.

more attractive prospect to the constituency's industrial workers. In May 1938 their first meeting took place, with T. F. James (the regional agent) and Gwilym Rowlands present.<sup>29</sup> However the committee was not a success. Following its inaugural meeting only two other gatherings were convened. The outbreak of the Second World War prevented its further development, although it is doubtful that it would have enjoyed any significant measure of success. Whilst no membership records survive, it is probable that the committee failed to attract even a small following. On a national level, recruitment was a major problem and few working class men joined. Ball notes 'many Local Advisory Committees had only a paper existence or a membership composed of the retired, women, and lower middle class men'.<sup>30</sup> The Flintshire party also failed in their endeavours to dominate the county council. Although the party did gain an additional 5 seats in 1937, making a total of 15 seats, they continued to trail the Liberals, who had nearly twice as many councillors.

Even though the initiatives instigated by the Flintshire Conservatives during the latter 1930s were not necessarily resoundingly successful, they were driven by a positive and forward looking spirit. Party officials knew that they had to compete with their political opponents on their own terms if they were to continue representing the constituency at parliamentary level. In Denbigh and Wrexham the Conservative position was far more tenuous. Essentially it was their fear of progressivism and socialism that motivated them to meet regularly throughout this period. The Denbigh Tories were especially anxious of the manoeuvrings of the Labour party. The divisions that existed within Liberal ranks drove a minority of Liberals into the arms of the local Labour party. The Conservatives were acutely aware of such developments. They were anxious that Henry Morris-Jones' position

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<sup>29</sup> Flintshire Unionist Advisory Committee minute book, 25 May 1938, D/DM/307/10.

<sup>30</sup> S. Ball, *opt. cit.*, p.277.

was not undermined as politics became more polarised in the division. Their annual report in December 1937 stated:

‘There is ample evidence of the activities of the Socialist Party, and unless we maintain an efficient organisation to ensure the return of the National Government we are bound to suffer when it comes to a General Election. We are alive to the fact that a number of Liberals are working against the present National Liberal Member. This is greatly regretted, but at the same time has to be combated.’<sup>31</sup>

Given the bad feeling that existed amongst the different Liberal factions in the division, it is unsurprising that some supported Labour activities. Indeed Liberal support gave the Labour party in this constituency an added credibility. Nonetheless in terms of power and influence Labour still lagged behind the National Liberals and Conservatives. Henry Morris-Jones’ popularity could not be matched by any other political figure in the constituency during the 1930s. However this knowledge evidently did not satisfy the Conservatives. Not since the mid 1920s had they sought to identify their own areas of weakness and move to rectify them. This was the first time they had expressed any overt fear that the influence of socialism might spread. Clearly the prospect of independent Liberals assisting Labour, and thus giving it a more respectable face, inspired them into action.

Local leaders were very concerned that members of local Conservative groups were indifferent to national, political, developments. This was especially true with regards to members of the Junior Imperial League. The Denbigh division’s agent was distressed to

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<sup>31</sup> Denbigh Divisional Conservative party minutes, 31 December 1937, DD/DM/80/3.

report that despite good attendances at social gatherings ‘when something serious was to be discussed, it was difficult to get an attendance at all’.<sup>32</sup> Yet the party also understood that it was through their emphasis on socialising and arranging functions, like bazaars and garden parties, that they attracted potential voters. The same was true with regard to the Conservatives clubs in Ruthin and Denbigh. The agent believed that their mere existence provided the party with valuable centres for like-minded people to congregate. He argued:

‘Here again, whilst one does not see any obvious signs of political activity, my own experience is that members are continually discussing among themselves political matters, and so long as the Clubs remain we have centres which are invaluable to the organisation as a whole.’<sup>33</sup>

The prospect of the growth of Labour in Denbigh finally pushed the Conservatives into action during the late 1930s. This transpired to be a positive development in the long term. It forced them to re-evaluate their position.

In Wrexham the situation was different, as rank and file Conservatives continued to be divided over their attitude towards the Liberal party. They had never possessed a strong presence in this constituency. However Aled O. Roberts’ decision to revert back to National Liberalism in 1937 did much to further weaken their position and created rifts within their ranks. In October 1937 Roberts was re-adopted by the Wrexham Tories as their official National Government candidate. This was not a popular decision in all quarters. Indeed, the association’s chairman, Edmund FitzHugh, was unhappy with the arrangement, particularly given the acrimonious relationship that had previously existed

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 28 October 1938.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



between both parties.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless as the division's former MP, Roberts stood a good chance of being elected. He was also reputed to have the support of the constituency's farming community.<sup>35</sup> Yet in the aftermath of this decision the Conservatives were showing signs of disunity. During the annual meeting of the Wrexham Four Wards Women's committee in April 1938, their honorary secretary reported the demise of the group. She asserted that many branches were under threat due to a growing lack of interest in politics. 'I find it difficult to resuscitate some of the branches as some of our members deplore the absence of a Conservative candidate'.<sup>36</sup> Throughout the remainder of the 1930s and early 1940s the Wrexham Conservatives went into a steep decline. Essentially this was caused by the Liberals' lurch to the political 'right'. By 1937 Aled O. Roberts and the Liberals had finally understood that only a party purporting to represent the 'right' could challenge Labour's stranglehold over the constituency. Thus, through vowing their allegiance to the National Government, the Conservatives' limited base of support was threatened. The Tories were unable to compete.

For some parties the late 1930s signified a period of development or regeneration. This was true for Labour in Flintshire and the Conservatives in Denbigh. Elsewhere more established parties, who had remained fairly active from the early 1920s onwards reaped the rewards of their consistency and continuity. They had built solid foundations in their constituencies, and nurtured and encouraged a culture of determination and activism. The Wrexham Labour party, the Flintshire Conservatives and the Flintshire Liberals all fall into this category. Whilst their success was not constant during the inter war years, their stamina and appetite remained intact. All three of these associations honed an awareness of their constituents' needs. Essentially they were progressive in their outlook and grasped the

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<sup>34</sup> Wrexham Conservative association minutes, 12 October 1937, NLW.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

importance of national party politics. For them the outbreak of the Second World War stunted their growth. However for other associations the commencement of hostilities signalled a brief respite, and an opportunity to refocus.

The Conservatives of Wrexham, along with all the parties of Montgomeryshire, were clinging to life at this juncture. In Wrexham this was unsurprising given the social and economic composition of the seat. Nevertheless the position in Montgomeryshire was unique as even the incumbent MP's divisional party was perilously close to collapse. The lack of financial resources and assistance received from their respective headquarters fails to adequately explain their situation. Nearly all the associations examined during the course of this study encountered financial difficulties, to varying degrees, at some point during the period. Moreover whilst the majority were advised and guided by a national agent, once the association had established or strengthened its infrastructure the assistance offered by headquarters receded. Although other works stress the importance of national policy initiatives – especially in reviving Conservative fortunes – this study suggests that national parties were less than successful in conveying such ideas.

By the late 1930s political power had little to do with political debate. Pacts prevented parties from engaging in enthusiastic discussion. Moreover in constituencies where power remained concentrated in the hands of a few, rank and file members had no impact on their future. By this time the Liberal party was a fragmented and broken force. Whilst they had always lacked support from Abingdon Street, never before had they been in such desperate need of assistance. In the absence of a figure to lead them through these dark time on both

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<sup>36</sup> Wrexham Four Wards Women's Committee minutes, April 1938 (no specific date), NLW.

a regional and local level, their prospects were gloomy. The results of the 1945 election illustrate the extent to which their influence had disappeared.

Table 8.2

Result of 1945 Election in North East Wales

| <i>Constituency</i>    | <i>Candidate</i>   | <i>Party</i> | <i>Number of votes</i> | <i>Percentage of vote</i> | <i>Majority</i> | <i>Turnout</i> |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| <i>Denbigh</i>         | J. H. Morris-Jones | Nat.Lib      | 17023                  | 41.7                      | 12.1%           | 74.8%          |
|                        | E. H. G. Evans     | Lib          | 12101                  | 29.6                      | -               | -              |
|                        | W. L. Mars-Jones   | Lab          | 11702                  | 28.7                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Flintshire</i>      | E. N. C. Birch     | Con          | 27800                  | 38.8                      | 1.4%            | 76.7%          |
|                        | Miss. E. L. Jones  | Lab          | 26761                  | 37.4                      | -               | -              |
|                        | J. W. Hughes       | Lib          | 17007                  | 23.8                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Montgomeryshire</i> | E. C. Davies       | Lib          | 14018                  | 56.3                      | 12.6%           | 77.4%          |
|                        | P. L. W. Owen      | Con          | 10895                  | 43.7                      | -               | -              |
| <i>Wrexham</i>         | R. Richards        | Lab          | 26854                  | 56.0                      | 27.4%           | 76.8%          |
|                        | D. L. Milne        | Nat.Lib      | 13714                  | 28.6                      | -               | -              |
|                        | J. D. Williams     | Lib          | 6960                   | 14.5                      | -               | -              |
|                        | J. R. Hayes-Jones  | Ind          | 430                    | 0.9                       | -               | -              |

Source: F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949*, Glasgow 1969.

Only in Denbigh and Montgomeryshire did the party retain its standing. In Flintshire, Liberalism had slumped to an all-time low. The party trailed behind the Tories and Labour, gaining a quarter of the vote. Their fall from grace here certainly reflected events nationally— the party only returned 12 MPs throughout the country. Despite the fact the Tories and Labour had not been particularly co-ordinated in their endeavours to capture North East Wales, in the face of the Liberals' crumbling opposition the only real obstacles they faced after 1935 were each other. Both parties vied for the centre ground. In Flintshire the Conservatives deliberately targeted the working classes, and narrowly defeated Labour. In Montgomeryshire, the Tories finally broke their fear of fighting, and polled respectably. In Wrexham Robert Richards promoted ideas and issues that can only be described as

'Liberal' in nature. It had taken thirty years to break the hold of the Liberal party – and even then, its values had seemingly permeated the other parties.

The events of the later 1930s do have a bearing on the key themes of this thesis. The final demise of Liberalism, like its problems after 1918, had little to do with the advance of a working class consciousness. The emergence of a stronger and more radical national force – namely Labour - failed to make a decisive overall impact on this region during the inter-war years. In essence it was the Liberal party itself that instigated its own demise. Despite being able to survive, and in places adapt, during the 1920s it was unable to adapt to the needs of a changing electorate by the late 1930s. It was not 'class politics' or specifically Welsh circumstances that dictated this. Local politics was invariably affected by national developments. For the Liberals the disarray, confusion and suspicion that had been pre-eminent from 1916 in Westminster eventually permeated and infected constituency politics. Whilst in the aftermath of the Great War most local parties remained unified, without clear guidance from Abingdon Street many wandered without direction or aim. Political vision was in short supply in North East Wales between 1918 and 1924. Consequently the vacuum of power that emerged allowed ambitious Tories and eager Labour activists to steal a march. Nonetheless, both Labour and the Conservatives underestimated the emotional pull of Liberalism and the loyalty and affection it commanded in the immediate post war period. Whilst a strong drive ensured the advance of the opposing parties to a certain degree, during these years they were yet to establish a strong rapport with the electorate. For the time being they relied on national factors to promote their cause.

Liberal efforts between 1924 and 1929 jolted and, to a certain extent, stunted the advance of the Conservatives and Labour. The result of the 1924 election forced Liberal officials, locally and nationally, to confront the prospect of their demise. They could no longer afford to be complacent about their position. It is significant in the case of North East Wales that this reality was comprehended and acted upon – independently of the national party. Whilst officials at Abingdon Street attempted to analyse organisational problems, they exerted little influence on the constituency parties in North East Wales – despite the fact that this was considered a Liberal stronghold. Moreover the policy initiatives developed by the Liberal intellectual elite during this period, which were much celebrated in Westminster, were not necessarily afforded the same reception at constituency level. Whilst local party members enthusiastically greeted proposals to reduce unemployment, other schemes, such as land reform, were given a cool reception in rural North Wales. Thus, the great emotional and financial investment which the 1929 election represented did not pay dividends. The relative significance of local and national party activity fluctuated: seldom were they combined in single aim at a single time.

Chris Cook and K .O. Morgan have argued that the party had lost too much support to realistically form a government by 1929. Furthermore, despite the fact that the new policies developed had a sound intellectual grounding, in the main their subtleties and intricacies was lost on the bulk of the electorate. Yet whilst 1929 was a disappointment for the Liberals in Westminster, the position of the party in North East Wales indicates the ability of some constituency parties to re-assert their strength, either as a result of the election or in by-elections prior to the contest. The national party failed to fully appreciate its own potential.<sup>37</sup> It was not the appeal of Liberalism but the party that was broken. In

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<sup>37</sup> See chapter 4, pp. 20-21.

North East Wales following a successful and proactive campaign, the Liberals regained Flintshire despite the Conservatives' grip on the division. If the party was to survive elsewhere it needed to encourage and copy the fighting spirit demonstrated in Flintshire. Nevertheless, following the election the national party failed to do this. Thus, unsuccessful associations were left to drift in their own political orbit, whilst active and popular parties were not given the necessary support to maintain their position. Indeed if an area of comparative Liberal strength, like North East Wales, was left largely unaided the chances of refocusing and harnessing the ambitions of other areas was remote.

It is significant that by the late 1920s and early 1930s Labour and the Conservatives were not only attempting to commandeer areas of traditional Liberal policy – but on a local level were trying to emulate the public affection and local familiarity that the Liberals had once engendered. Constituency politics transcended the confines of class politics. This trend is best exemplified in Wrexham, where Labour's concern for the plight of local communities convinced a considerable proportion of the electorate of their sincerity and helped develop a cross-class appeal. The Liberals were forced to compete on the same terms as their opponents. However, they were losing touch. The image projected by the Liberal constituency parties in Flintshire and Denbigh, in particular, contributed to their negative image. A real conflict existed around the definition of 'Liberalism' and whether national or party interests should take priority. At most times, the least active parties were preoccupied with pacts – not policy – as a means of securing their position. The constructed national appeals described by Jarvis, Savage, McKibbin, and others, were often less apparent than those devices.

Evidently the decline of Liberalism in this region occurred very gradually. The extent of that decline was not inevitable. Local Liberalism was failed by the national party. A resilient local political creed was not reinforced. Conservative and Labour parties were better served by their national organisations. Much research has been concerned with the ‘centralisation’ and ‘nationalisation’ of politics, seeing this as an element of ‘modernisation’. This thesis has endeavoured to go some way to redress this balance in showing that ‘nationalisation’ was not always a help. In the Liberal party, ‘national’ images and influences undermined local activism or failed to assist in times of need.

This thesis contributes to a body of literature which has questioned the validity of analysing politics purely on a class basis. The dynamics of politics in North East Wales illustrates that more complex issues need to be considered. Society’s needs evolved gradually during the inter-war period. The constituency parties which experienced the greatest degree of success were the ones which appreciated existing demands, while at the same time adapting to new challenges. These included some Liberal parties. Often these associations did not rely on the initiatives pursued by their national parties. Alternatively they depended on instinct and local activists to construct and maintain a local appeal.

The thesis also illuminates an area of Welsh electoral politics which has hitherto been neglected. Previously the intricacies of North Wales politics have been passed over, ignored in favour of dramatic changes in the South or marginalized as part of the ‘Celtic fringe’. The demographic and economic changes witnessed in constituencies like Wrexham and Flintshire and their impact on political change has been neglected. Yet only through understanding the diversity of Wales can its politics be understood, and only by understanding areas like this – common across the UK – can the whole of Britain’s

political shifts be properly appreciated. Welsh historians have practically ignored the Conservatives' advance during this period. Indeed, little has been written about the re-emergence of Conservatism in the 1930s in other parts of the UK. The mixed seats of North East Wales may provide broad clues about what was happening elsewhere.

Significantly, this thesis shows that the demise of Liberalism in North East Wales was not inevitable before 1931. In this respect it offers a far more positive and comprehensive analysis than studies like Chris Cook's or even Mike Savage's study of Preston – since both assume the automatic decline of Liberalism after 1924. The experience of North East Wales suggests that the party had the power and the capability to adapt and cultivate new support as late as 1931. This could well have been the case elsewhere in Britain. Had it not been for the cancer that spread throughout the parliamentary party following the creation of a national government – and infected the constituencies – it is possible that the party would have survived as a substantial force in 1945. However this was not to be – ultimately the party was undermined by its own failings, and the election of 1945 saw it act not as a progressive alternative to Labour but as an insignificant rump of a now redundant party.



## Appendix 1

Membership of the NWMMA, 1918-1939Names of Lodges

|                      | 1918  | 1919  | 1920  | 1921  | 1922  | 1923  | 1924  | 1925  | 1926  | 1927 | 1928 |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|
| <i>W'm and Acton</i> | 726   | 772   | 843   | 207   | 239   | 302   | 269   | 0     | 0     | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Gate Wen</i>      | 650   | 770   | 870   | 555   | 408   | 633   | 534   | 1214  | 1253  | 562  | 481  |
| <i>Plaspower</i>     | 1029  | 1181  | 1209  | 1052  | 855   | 988   | 934   | 1130  | 968   | 703  | 714  |
| <i>Point of Ayr</i>  | 489   | 514   | 506   | 480   | 425   | 442   | 444   | 422   | 431   | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Black Park</i>    | 327   | 379   | 389   | 373   | 387   | 370   | 373   | 374   | 359   | 369  | 310  |
| <i>Wynnstay</i>      | 1068  | 1332  | 1432  | 1353  | 1236  | 1218  | 1126  | 1136  | 1192  | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Westminster</i>   | 806   | 845   | 846   | 357   | 326   | 407   | 288   | 0     | 0     | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Buckley</i>       | 257   | 263   | 258   | 204   | 187   | 195   | 256   | 270   | 270   | 225  | 0    |
| <i>Brynkynallt</i>   | 481   | 641   | 675   | 669   | 722   | 711   | 521   | 421   | 435   | 53   | 0    |
| <i>Bagillt</i>       | 384   | 644   | 638   | 377   | 232   | 238   | 193   | 171   | 145   | 171  | 202  |
| <i>Havod</i>         | 1748  | 1895  | 1891  | 1620  | 1396  | 1658  | 1704  | 1882  | 1912  | 1601 | 1508 |
| <i>Vauxhall</i>      | 330   | 353   | 352   | 394   | 542   | 595   | 581   | 413   | 481   | 353  | 0    |
| <i>Bersham</i>       | 856   | 926   | 908   | 824   | 779   | 768   | 782   | 785   | 772   | 601  | 553  |
| <i>Gwersyllt</i>     | 328   | 366   | 333   | 200   | 200   | 234   | 234   | 0     | 0     | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Coed Talon</i>    | 204   | 377   | 451   | 204   | 118   | 67    | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Wirral</i>        | 194   | 262   | 313   | 300   | 216   | 295   | 288   | 137   | 132   | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Llay Hall</i>     | 216   | 307   | 343   | 364   | 288   | 102   | 268   | 278   | 135   | 213  | 251  |
| <i>Bryn Mally</i>    | 415   | 447   | 415   | 331   | 250   | 292   | 342   | 347   | 146   | 264  | 208  |
| <i>Elm</i>           | 507   | 552   | 563   | 528   | 414   | 387   | 520   | 528   | 509   | 357  | 256  |
| <i>Yron</i>          | 345   | 382   | 416   | 267   | 191   | 239   | 213   | 265   | 264   | 175  | 117  |
| <i>Cefn-y-Bedd</i>   | 157   | 180   | 184   | 170   | 89    | 116   | 126   | 0     | 0     | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Gresford</i>      | 1144  | 1355  | 1520  | 778   | 1214  | 797   | 1465  | 1293  | 1144  | 781  | 566  |
| <i>Ifton</i>         | 271   | 346   | 389   | 630   | 700   | 725   | 880   | 876   | 860   | 199  | 272  |
| <i>Ffrith</i>        | 106   | 158   | 152   | 98    | 69    | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Tryddyn</i>       | 328   | 371   | 528   | 374   | 301   | 448   | 572   | 519   | 510   | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Englefield</i>    | 85    | 117   | 128   | 117   | 69    | 187   | 205   | 191   | 189   | 190  | 0    |
| <i>Alun Bank</i>     | 132   | 128   | 141   | 54    | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Celyn</i>         |       |       | 97    | 91    | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0     | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Llay Main</i>     |       |       | 46    | 149   | 643   | 1653  | 2108  | 1433  | 1845  | 2400 | 3132 |
| <i>Nerquis</i>       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       | 136   | 176   | 118  | 148  |
| <i>Office</i>        | 2     | 3     | 3     | 3     | 3     | 3     | 3     | 3     | 3     | 3    | 3    |
| <b>Total</b>         | 13583 | 15866 | 16836 | 13120 | 12496 | 14067 | 15226 | 14221 | 14128 | 9338 | 8718 |

Names of Lodges

|                           | 1929 | 1930 | 1931 | 1932 | 1933 | 1934 | 1935 | 1936 | 1937 | 1938 | 1939 |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <i>Gate Wen</i>           | 503  | 537  | 599  | 102  | 76   | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Plaspower</i>          | 655  | 597  | 634  | 735  | 450  | 589  | 639  | 675  | 603  | 635  | 0    |
| <i>Point of Ayr</i>       | 0    |      | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 1    | 1    |
| <i>Black Park</i>         | 259  | 287  | 241  | 194  | 255  | 287  | 313  | 456  | 413  | 423  | 371  |
| <i>Wynnstay</i>           | 35   | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |      | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Bagilt</i>             | 180  | 151  | 331  | 116  | 90   | 5    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Havod</i>              | 1516 | 1554 | 1455 | 1331 | 1042 | 1029 | 1031 | 1454 | 1473 | 1500 | 1470 |
| <i>Bersham</i>            | 597  | 604  | 621  | 627  | 648  | 698  | 612  | 612  | 581  | 786  | 756  |
| <i>Wirral</i>             | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Llay Hall</i>          | 233  | 267  | 275  | 312  | 312  | 282  | 385  | 459  | 484  | 477  | 441  |
| <i>Bryn Mally</i>         | 197  | 204  | 308  | 422  | 375  | 402  | 153  | 50   | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Elm</i>                | 283  | 305  | 305  | 106  | 113  | 51   | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Vron</i>               | 123  | 120  | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Gresford</i>           | 694  | 644  | 520  | 401  | 749  | 584  | 856  | 1000 | 963  | 1178 | 1095 |
| <i>Ifton</i>              | 335  | 409  | 347  | 315  | 482  | 502  | 602  | 1007 | 930  | 1025 | 935  |
| <i>Englefield</i>         | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    |
| <i>Llay Main</i>          | 3203 | 3082 | 3002 | 2779 | 2789 | 2778 | 2678 | 2488 | 2482 | 2350 | 2329 |
| <i>Nerquis</i>            | 139  | 82   | 0    | 19   | 0    | 15   | 17   | 31   | 24   | 25   | 24   |
| <i>Black Lane</i>         |      |      |      | 37   |      | 37   | 42   | 28   | 37   | 36   | 39   |
| <i>Tanllan</i>            |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      | 25   | 32   | 32   |
| <i>Alyn Bank</i>          |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      | 11   | 3    | 0    |
| <i>Holland</i>            |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      | 32   | 29   | 28   |
| <i>Offa's Dyke Office</i> | 3    | 3    | 3    | 3    | 0    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2    |
| <b>Total</b>              | 8955 | 8846 | 8641 | 7462 | 7381 | 7261 | 7330 | 8262 | 8060 | 8502 | 7538 |

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