

'The Steady Tapping Breaks the Rock'

Russell Deacon traces the history of the post-war Welsh Liberal tradition.

There is a Welsh proverb which states that it is the 'steady tapping that breaks the rock'. Over the last forty years, Welsh Liberals have undergone a process of consolidation rather than experienced any significant expansion. After Plaid Cymru's political breakthrough in the 1970s the Welsh Liberals and then the Welsh Liberal Democrats remained the fourth political party in Wales. Recent Conservative misfortunes have brought the Welsh Liberal Democrats back to the position of third largest political party in Wales. This article explores the history of the Welsh Liberal Party since its establishment in 1966 and more latterly the Welsh Liberal Democrats, formed in 1988.¹

'Our spirit is such that if the Liberal Party died elsewhere it would always go on in Wales'

Major Parry Brown (Chairman of the Liberal Party in Wales), 19 December 1949

Major Parry Brown's confidence in the Welsh Liberals reflected a strong Liberal tradition in Wales which reached its peak in 1906 when, for the first time this century, Wales became a Tory-free zone. The Liberal and Lib-Lab candidates took thirty-three of Wales' thirty-five seats, with the Labour Party taking the other two. Liberalism in Wales had reached its zenith. For the whole of the twentieth century Liberalism has held on in Wales – though sometimes, such as during the periods between 1979–83 and 1992–97, by only one seat. There has, however, never been a period in the twentieth century when Liberalism has not been represented in Wales, in contrast to Welsh nationalism, in the shape of Plaid Cymru, or Conservatism. For parts of the twentieth century Wales almost acted as a refuge for Liberalism within the United Kingdom – half of the parliamentary party after the 1951 election repre-

sented Welsh constituencies, for instance. MPs from Wales have played a prominent role in the United Kingdom party as well. The national party was twice led by Welsh Liberal MPs: David Lloyd George (1926–31) and Clement Davies (1945–56).

The origins of a distinct Welsh Liberal Party go back to the closing decade of the last century. In the late nineteenth century the Liberals in Wales were split into two Federations of North and South Wales. The North Wales Liberal Federation supported the idea of a Welsh Liberal Party that was distinct from that in England. Anglicised Liberals in the South, however, strongly resisted 'Welsh domination'. The present day Welsh Party emerged when Lloyd George formed the Welsh Liberal Council in 1897. The lack of trust between the northern and southern elements of the party, however, ensured that the Council was only an organisational shell.² Power remained with the Federations.

Between 1916 and 1951, the Asquith/Lloyd George split and the three-way division caused by the formation of the National Government in 1931 caused divisions within Wales which ensured that the Council's role remained irrelevant. The key post of Welsh Liberal Agent and Secretary was not even filled between 1936 and 1946, and often the Northern and Southern Federations passed conflicting resolutions.³ The party lacked a Welsh identity in everything but name and developed few distinctively Welsh policies beyond support for political and administrative devolution.

In 1945, the Liberal Party contested eighteen seats in Wales, winning eight; Liberals in Welsh seats made up more than half of the parliamentary party.⁴ Between 1945–59 the number of Welsh Liberal MPs was reduced from eight to two; in the latter year, the Welsh component of the Parliamentary Liberal Party was reduced to a third. The number of Welsh seats contested by Liberals had also fallen, to eight. Liberals were represented in local gov-

ernment only where they were prepared to stand as independents.⁵

Strong measures were felt to be needed in order to save the party; in 1959 the secretary of the party in Wales, G. Madoc-Jones, declared that: 'a constructive and positive remedy would be for the Liberal Party of Wales to declare itself an autonomous and quite independent organisation.'⁶ Clement Davies had concentrated on the survival of the national party and therefore had done little to encourage Welsh party devolution. This notion was taken up by Emlyn Hooson upon his election for Clement Davies' seat of Montgomeryshire following Davies' death in 1962. Over the next few years Hooson, together with other prominent Welsh Liberals such as Lord Ogmores, Martin Thomas, G.W. Madoc-Jones and Geraint Howells, determined to pursue a far greater degree of Welsh devolution within the Liberal Party. They were also concerned that Plaid Cymru was increasingly stealing their clothes on the issue of devolution, and building up a healthy support in many traditional Liberal areas of North Wales.⁷

Graham Jones, the Welsh historian, saw the Liberals in the period up until 1966 as a party which: 'emerged as increasingly the political home of the elderly, ever more detached from the mainstream of Welsh political life, many of its younger radicals defecting to Labour, the Welsh patriots embracing Plaid Cymru, and some former Liberals finding a congenial home in the Conservative Party. The Liberal appeal and commitment to traditional values and memories were no longer sufficient to win the party mass electoral support in Wales.'⁸

In March 1966 Roderic Bowen was defeated by 523 votes in the traditional Liberal seat of Cardiganshire. With the Liberals reduced to just one seat (Emlyn Hooson's Montgomeryshire) and with a fearful eye being trained upon the rising fortunes of Plaid Cymru, the momentum for change began to build up. On 10 September 1966, two hun-

dred delegates at the Welsh Liberal Conference at Llanidloes decided, upon Hooson's advice, to set up a separate party, based on the Scottish Liberal Party model, with federated links to the Liberal Party Organisation in London.⁹ This move was unpopular in south Wales but a federal structure has been retained ever since.

Policy in the new Welsh party continued to be focused on political devolution. The standard and depth of debate on this issue within the party meant that, at its second annual conference, at Llandrindod Wells in June 1968, Hooson was able to declare that his party had become 'the thinking party in Wales ... the think-tank of Welsh politics'.¹⁰ Welsh Liberals championed devolution at Westminster. Hooson introduced the Government of Wales Bill, which advocated a Welsh Parliament, on St. David's Day 1967, though this was soundly defeated. Over the next ten years, the Liberals fought hard to distinguish themselves in their enthusiasm for devolution from Plaid Cymru.

The fact that the Welsh Liberals had further embraced devolution made little difference to their electability in the 1970 general election, where the party only contested around a third of the seats (Table 1). But they did gain Cardiganshire in February 1974, and by the general election of October 1974 the party was able to contest all of the Welsh seats for the first time since 1906. Over the next twenty-three years, however, despite achieving, at most, in 1983, almost a quarter of the Welsh popular vote, the party never won more than three MPs in Wales (Table 1).

The 1974 Liberal victory in Cardiganshire brought on to the political stage the Ponterwyd hill-farmer Geraint Howells. Howells, like Hooson, was an ardent devolutionist.¹¹ On some issues, such as Welsh education, he sometimes appeared closer to the Plaid Cymru agenda than to that of his own

Table 1
Liberal Party/Alliance/Liberal Democrat share of votes and seats in Wales 1970-97

Year	% of vote	MPs
1970	6.8	1
1974 Feb	16.0	2
1974 Oct	15.5	2
1979	10.6	1
1983	23.2	2
1987	17.9	3
1992	12.4	1
1997	12.0	2

party.¹² Owing to Howells and Hooson, the Liberals' commitment to devolution, including the proposals of the Callaghan government, was reinforced. Beyond devolution, however, both MPs paid only limited attention to policy creation or the general stewardship of the Welsh Liberal Party. The party failed to make any real gains in the local government elections of 1976 and 1979, which saw major Labour setbacks. The practical role of holding the Welsh party together was left to Martin Thomas QC, Vice Chair of the Welsh Party between 1967-69, Chair between 1969-74 and President between 1977-79. Thomas, a successful barrister based in North Wales and London, played a crucial role in running the Welsh party and encouraging policy creation across a broad range of issues until the 1997 general election.

Howells' support for devolution may have been popular in the Welsh-speaking heartland of Cardiganshire, but was less so in Montgomeryshire. Hooson's support for devolution alienated him from the increasing number of English immigrants into the area.¹³ In the 1979 general election, as the Liberals prepared to celebrate a 'Liberal century' in Montgomeryshire, Hooson lost his seat. Welsh Liberal fortunes were once again at a low ebb.

The limited popularity of devolution forced Howells and the Welsh party to concentrate on other areas of policy, including local government reform. This made little difference to

the fortunes of the Welsh Liberal Party and not even the advent of the Alliance with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) boosted significantly Liberal representation in Wales. Montgomery was regained in 1983, by Alex Carlile, but this was a meagre reward for an Alliance poll of 23.2%. Carlile was much more of a national politician than Howells, who directed his attention towards his own special interests of home affairs and agriculture.¹⁴

Richard Livsey's byelection victory in 1985, as Liberal/Alliance, did little to revitalise the Welsh party. At the 1986 conference so few delegates arrived that the conference came close to being abandoned.¹⁵ It was unsurprising, therefore, that at the 1987 general election the party's vote fell back to 17.9% and no new seats were won, although the three existing seats were held.

In March 1988 a joint conference of both the Welsh Liberal Party and SDP, although attended by only eight members, saw both parties merged. The SDP had never succeeded in winning a Parliamentary seat in Wales and, unlike in England or Scotland, no prominent SDP MPs or peers were able to stamp their mark on the new Welsh party. Only a few of the key Welsh SDP figures such as Gwynoro Jones (former Labour MP for Carmarthen) and Tom Ellis (former Labour MP for Wrexham) and a few SDP councillors in Neath and Taff-Ely district councils remained much involved at the time of the merger, and none became prominent in the new party. Cardiff Liberal councillor Jenny Randerson, for instance, beat Gwynoro Jones in the contest for the chairmanship of the new party. By 1992 the Welsh Party Executive of

thirty-four included only four who had previously belonged to the SDP. This implied that the core of the Welsh Liberal Democrats remained strongly Liberal in background; the party's three MPs – Carlile, Howells and Livsey – were all former Liberal Party members. As a result, it was traditional Welsh Liberal ideals, rather than those of the SDP, which shaped the Welsh party's policy agenda. This encouraged weak central control of Liberal Democrats in Wales, especially because the SDP bequeathed little in the way of money or administrative resources to the new party.

The Alliance's inheritance did include some benefits. The creation of the SDP, and its alliance with the Liberals, breathed new life into Liberals at local government level. Although few SDP councillors were elected, for the first time in decades Liberal councillors appeared on urban councils, including Cardiff and Swansea. The Alliance also tended to contest more seats than either the Conservatives or Plaid Cymru. As a consequence, whereas the Liberals had held 2.6% of district council seats in 1979, the Alliance held 6.1% in 1987; there was a similar rise in the number of county council seats held, from 1.9% in 1977 to 6.5% in 1985.¹⁶ Although this did not include the control of any councils, it did give the Alliance a presence for the first time on many.

Whilst the 1980s had proved to be a period of expansion for the Alliance, the 1989 European elections and the 1992 general election were severe disappointments for the Welsh Liberal Democrats. In the latter election, Geraint Howells lost his seat to Plaid Cymru and Richard Livsey lost his to the Conservatives. The party fell behind Plaid Cymru in terms of

parliamentary representation, retaining only one seat, Alex Carlile's Montgomeryshire. As a result of this poor election performance, the party's 1992 Swansea conference decided to take a number of measures to avoid the Liberal Democrats' total elimination in Wales. Prominent amongst these was the upgrading of the party's Welsh HQ, which for the previous two decades had been run by part-time staff, to a full-time office. It also allowed for the employment of a full-time party manager, Judi Lewis, who had previously been secretary to Geraint Howells MP. A distinct Welsh policy agenda was also to be encouraged.

Alex Carlile attempted to fulfil the role of Welsh Leader and federal party spokesman on issues ranging from health to the Home Office for the next five years. While Howells and Hooson had also adopted this role in the past, the demands made on Carlile's time by the media, as well as by Welsh question time, the Welsh Grand Committee, the Welsh Affairs Select Committee and other parliamentary activities requiring a Welsh Liberal input, were considerable. To help Carlile, Martin Thomas was elevated to the peerage in 1996. He was the first Welsh Liberal Democrat or Welsh Liberal who had not been an MP to join the House of Lords since the party's formation in 1966.

By the time of the 1997 general election the Welsh party had publicly targeted the seats of Brecon & Radnorshire, Ceredigion, Conwy and Montgomeryshire for election victories. All needed swings of 3.1% or less; Brecon & Radnorshire was one of the most marginal seats in the whole of the United Kingdom. In Ceredigion and Conwy the Liberal Democrats put forward two traditional Welsh-speaking Liberal candidates, Dai Davies and Roger Roberts. In the event, however, the party quietly abandoned Ceredigion. A traditionally Welsh-speaking and politically independent area, the mainly English-speaking Welsh Executive felt that an uncharismatic candidate had been selected and that

Table 2 Welsh Liberal Party fortunes 1970 and 1997

Election	Seats contested	Position (%)					Lost deposits (no.)
		1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	
1970	17 out of 36	6	7	53	29	6	2
1997	40 out of 40	5	18	55	23	0	2

(Sums do not total 100% due to rounding)

the seat was now irretrievably nationalist. Plaid increased its majority from less than two thousand votes to over ten thousand. Ceredigion was replaced by Cardiff Central as the party's fourth most winnable Welsh seat.

Conwy's fate, however, was different. A Conservative/Liberal marginal throughout the 1980s, Labour, who had become the strongest party on the local council in 1995, came from third to win in 1997. Richard Livsey did, however, regain Brecon & Radnorshire in a more anglicised part of Wales. Montgomeryshire was won by Lembit Öpik, a Newcastle councillor from Northern Ireland born of Estonian parents, with no previous Welsh background. Thus Welsh Liberal Parliamentary representation remained restricted to the English border county of Powys, and neither MP spoke Welsh. The failure of the Conservatives to win any seats in Wales in 1997 meant that the Liberal Democrats at Westminster, as well as at local government level, could truly claim to be the third party in Wales for the first time since the early 1970s. It was also significant that the total Liberal Democrat vote in Wales remained the same as in 1992, at 12.4%, despite the party languishing at between 6–7% in Welsh opinion polls between 1992–97.

In its first general election as a federal party, 1970, the Welsh Liberal Party contested 47% of the seats and came first in just one (Table 2). In its most recent election, 1997, the Welsh Liberal Democrats contested all of the seats and came first in two. Its overall electoral position remained better than in 1970 but it never managed to break out of the counties of Ceredigion or Powys at a Parliamentary level during the intervening period. As in 1970, however, the party remained in the position of the third most popular in the majority of the seats it contested. Perhaps a fitting judgement on a political party that has always thought to provide a third way in Welsh politics. When the first proportional elections are held for the Welsh Assembly, in May 1999, the

third party in Wales may well be represented throughout Wales for the first time since 1906. It will be case of the 'steady tapping of the Welsh Liberal Democrats' finally breaking the rock of its widespread political exclusion.

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Notes:

- 1 The Welsh Liberal Democrats' official title is Liberal Democrats Wales, chosen by the former leader Alex Carlile because it translates more closely the Welsh name of *Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru*. For grammatical reasons they are referred to as the Welsh Liberal Democrats throughout this article.
- 2 K. O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation* (Oxford University Press, 1981), p.44.
- 3 D. Roberts, 'The Strange Death of Liberal Wales' in J. Osmond (ed), *The Na-*

tional Question Again: Welsh Political Identity in the 1980s (Gomer Press, 1985), p. 81.

- 4 Clive Betts, *The Political Conundrum* (Gomer Press, 1993), p. 17.
- 5 J. Graham Jones, 'The Liberal Party and Wales 1945–79', *The Welsh History Review* 16:3 (June 1993), p. 355.
- 6 Roberts, 'The Strange Death of Liberal Wales', p. 90.
- 7 Graham Jones, 'The Liberal Party and Wales 1945–79', p. 347.
- 8 Graham Jones, 'The Liberal Party and Wales 1945–79', p. 355.
- 9 Roberts, 'The Strange Death of Liberal Wales' p.90
- 10 Graham Jones, 'The Liberal Party and Wales 1945–79', p. 349.
- 11 Duncan Brack et al (eds), *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (Politico's Publishing, 1998), p. 190.
- 12 Betts, *The Political Conundrum*, p. 18.
- 13 K. O. Morgan 'Montgomeryshire's Liberal Century: Rendel to Hooson, 1880–1979', *The Welsh History Review* 16:1 (June 1992), p. 108.
- 14 Brack, *Dictionary of Liberal Biography*, p. 72.
- 15 Betts, *The Political Conundrum*, p. 23.
- 16 M. Rallings and M. Thrasher, Local Government Election Results, *Local Government Chronicle* 1993, p.xix.

A Liberal Democrat History Group Evening Meeting

Did the Yellow Book spell the end of Asquithian Liberalism?

Britain's Industrial Future, the report of the Liberal Industrial Inquiry established by Lloyd George, was far in advance of any comparable contribution to political debate when it appeared in February 1928.

The 'Yellow Book's' advocacy of government planning to reduce unemployment formed the basis of the Liberal election campaign of 1929. What difference did it really make to British politics? Did it change the direction of the Liberal Party?

Discuss the issues with leading historians of the period
John Grigg and **Richard Grayson**.

(The meeting will follow the History Group AGM, at 6.30pm).

7.00pm, Monday 12 April

National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1