'A Sad Business'

The Resignation of Clement Davies

Geoffrey Sell examines the end of Clement Davies' leadership in 1956.

For much of Clement Davies' leadership the Liberal Party was battling for survival. It was his fate to be party leader at the lowest moment in its history. The party that had once seemed a natural vehicle of government was close to extinction, commanding the support of little more than two per cent of the electorate and securing the return of only three MPs to Westminster without the benefit of local pacts.

Unlike 1945 or 1950, the Liberal Party adopted a narrow-front strategy for the elections of 1951 and 1955. Just 109 and 110 candidates respectively were fielded, and this helps to account, in part, for the low Liberal poll. In only fifteen constituencies in Great Britain at the 1955 general election did Labour and Conservative candidates not occupy the first two positions in the poll. The pattern of party competition was that of a stable and balanced duopoly. In local government the party was equally weak. Only 1.5% of councillors elected in 1955 were Liberal. Moreover, the party was adrift on policy. Its progressive clothes had been stolen by Labour in the post-war years, and those who rejected socialism found an attractive option in a Tory party influenced by Liberal ideas and led by moderates like Eden and Macmillan.

Surrender, however, was not countenanced. After his successful election victory in 1951, Churchill offered Davies the Ministry of Education. The offer was refused, but to many observers it looked like a brave gesture from a politically dying man. Davies believed that however 'small are our numbers we have a task to perform, and that cannot be performed if we sink our independence and see the party gradually welded into the structure of another party.'[1] At the 1953 Assembly, the Party President described Davies 'as the leader of a party, which after fighting three political Dunkirks, refuses to lie down.'[2] Nevertheless, his leadership had been a controversial one. His political career was chequered, for although elected as Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire in 1929, he chose to follow the Simonites and join the National Liberals in 1931. It was not until 1942 that he rejoined the Liberal Party.

Both Attlee and Churchill retired from the leadership of their parties in 1955. Would Davies, aged seventy-two and leader of the Liberal Party since 1945, follow suit? Certainly amongst many leading activists there was a strong belief that there was need for change. It 'was plain that the Young Turks and their friends among the Old Guard had lost faith in Clement Davies, whose oratory had become even more emotional and rambling. Grimond, became clearly the best chance of change.'[3]

Grimond

Jo Grimond had been Chief Whip since 1950, and had married into the Liberal establishment, to Asquith's granddaughter, giving him his passport into Liberal politics. His mother-in-law, Lady Violet Bonham Carter, was 'the formidable high priestess of Liberalism.'[4] She took a proprietorial interest in the Liberal Party and the political hopes that she had once entertained for herself were transferred to Grimond. He was assisted by the lack of a credible alternative candidate. Of the six-man parliamentary party, two — Arthur Holt and Donald Wade — were clearly in Parliament only as result of tacit Liberal/Conservative pacts in Bolton and Huddersfield respectively. Roderic Bowen of Cardigan was not particularly energetic, and Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris was the Deputy Speaker.

The comments made at the January 1956 meeting of the National Executive can be seen as a criticism of Davies' leadership. Edwin Malindine claimed that 'in the space of the last twenty or thirty years, the Liberal Party had had setback after setback. Despite this, bands of Liberals were still working hard in the face of all defeats … above all, Liberal workers need inspiration.'[5] H. Graham White, a former Liberal MP, felt that: 'more leadership of almost a spiritual kind, with a new

and vigorous statement of policy, was required.'[6]

Although his Welsh oratory inspired the rank and file at rallies and at the annual Liberal Assembly, Clement Davies relied on generalities about Liberal philosophy, and could be rather woolly about current issues. For some Liberals, however, such as former Oxford University student David Penwarden, Davies displayed considerable passion. He was good on issues such as Africa and Europe. Penwarden recalls that Davies would: 'cry and break into tears when delivering a speech. He had a great rapport with students.'[7] Former Young Liberal Betty Corn was also an admirer. Davies' 'integrity shone through, one felt very loyal to him.'[8] During the latter part of his leadership, there was a resurgence of support for the Liberal Party at both Oxford and Cambridge universities, each of which had Liberal Clubs with memberships of over a thousand.

Davies did not pretend to be a party manager and was not very good at devising a positive programme for the party. He was rightly described as 'a radical evangelist' by temperament rather than a party boss, disliking rigid party organisation and conventions. Davies was thought intellectually flabby by the party hierarchy, including Lady Violet Bonham Carter and Philip Fothergill; Lady Violet's daughter, Laura Grimond, thought that Davies was faintly ridiculous.[9] David Steel commented that during Davies' leadership, 'all the Liberal Party was was the left-over of a once great party. It didn't seem to have any relevance to modern political thought.[10]

Revival

Despite these criticisms, the final year of Davies' leadership saw the beginnings of a Liberal revival which was to blossom under his successor. This had little to do with Davies, who was suffering from ill health. He had been forced to miss the 1955 Assembly and convalesce in Majorca. In a small number of rural and seaside constituencies, the party was benefiting from electoral disenchantment with the Eden government. This found expression at the Torquay by-election in December 1955, when the Liberal share of the vote increased from 14% to 23%. North West Liberals were told that this was 'a clear indication of political upturn … The Liberal Party is on the march again, the old crusading spirit is being recaptured.'[11] At Hereford two months later, Labour was pushed into third place and the Liberal candidate secured 36% of the vote.

There was also evidence from the 1955 General Election that the Liberals were beginning to attract a 'floating' or protest vote, those wavering in support or those wishing to protest against the existing government without switching their allegiance to the other major party. Thus in Bristol North-East two-thirds of a sample of Liberal voters at this election had not voted Liberal before.[12] The 1955 election marked a turning point in the Liberal Party's history. It was the first election since 1929 in which the party improved on its previous performance. The tide had been stemmed. There were few real setbacks and many minor successes. The Liberal share of the vote per candidate rose slightly from 14.7% to 15.1%. Six MPs were returned, allowing a degree of credibility that would have been impossible to retain had their numbers been reduced to only two or three. Above all, the Liberal Party had survived.

The perception that Liberal fortunes were on the increase put heart into its officers. Geoffrey Acland wrote to Sir Andrew McFadyean in March 1956 that: 'the result of the 1955 election had surprised him far more than even those of 1945 and 1950. Everything indicated to me that we could do nothing more than say we went down and deep down fighting. Although the need had always been there, now he felt for the first time for many years we may succeed.'[13]

In some constituencies there were distinct signs of improvement. Blackpool Liberals were informed at their Annual General Meeting that: 'Membership was on the upgrade and the financial position healthier than for many years. Wards never better organised. Nationally the party is gaining ground especially among the younger folk.'[14]

Pressure for change

Nevertheless, despite these indications that the party had began to emerge from the electoral abyss, it was clear that some prominent Lib-

Clement Davies with the President of the Liberal Party, Sir Arthur Comyns Carr, in 1959.

erals wanted a leadership change. These included Major-General Grey, the Party Treasurer, and Philip Fothergill, Party Vice-President, who concluded that the election results of 1951 and 1955 had been more disastrous than those of 1945 and 1950.[15] This was because only a small number of constituencies, where the Liberals appeared to have a reasonable chance of victory, were contested. A younger man could provide the drive necessary to improve the party organisation.

It was Grey, a man known for his bluntness and not giving a damn for anyone, who finally approached Davies and urged him to relinquish the position of leader. It 'was time to go … the party will accept Jo.'[16] This action was taken around June or July in 1956. Feelings of contrition sent the General straight away to Lady Violet. She asked him on whose authority he had told Davies to resign. He replied Fothergill. In times of crisis, Fothergill was the most respectable name one could think of. After all, he was head of the Temperance Association and Bands of Hope.

Grimond's engagement diary records that he met General Grey five times between the beginning of the year and July 1956. It also reveals that on 5 July he had lunch with Jeremy Thorpe, who, Dominic Le Foe, a publicity consultant to the party, claimed, was the mouthpiece of the campaign for Davies to go.[17] Thorpe was a member of the Party Council and candidate for North Devon, where he had increased the party's share of the vote from 19% to 32% in 1955. Granville Slack, Chairman of the Executive, recalls meeting Thorpe shortly before Davies resigned, when he was asked: 'can't we get rid of Clement Davies?' Slack replied to the effect that Thorpe should let things lie. He knew that Davies had not accepted any speaking engagements for the autumn, so consequently he expected him to resign.[18]

The parliamentary party was aware of the pressure for a change in the leadership. Arthur Holt, Grimond's closest colleague, recalled being rung up and written to during the final months of Davies's leadership by party activists. Richard Moore, than a leader writer on the *News Chronicle,* told Holt that unless Davies went there would be a demonstration at the Assembly by the Young Liberals.[19] The parliamentary party were, however, reluctant to act, as they did not want to create a bad atmosphere. Davies was regarded as a nice, warm-hearted, man who did not really have much idea where the party should go.[20]

The final stage

It seems unlikely that Grimond was unaware of what was going on. Upon arriving at the Assembly he 'vaguely discovered that there was a feeling that the existing leader, Clem Davies, should go.'[21] This was somewhat of an understatement, for the conference opened to newspaper headlines such as 'Davies: the big query'[22] and 'new leader for the Liberals.'[23]

Amid this intense leadership speculation, Grimond moved a resolution on automation. After a glowing introduction by the Assembly chair, he modestly stated that he appeared 'not as the white hope of the Liberal Party, but as the white hope of Kingston, Malden and Coombe Liberal Association' (the constituency association on whose behalf he was moving the resolution). His self-deprecatory, offhand, unforcedly humorous manner endeared him to the delegates. They made it unmistakably clear that he was their candidate for the position of leader-elect of the Liberal Party. He 'appeared before the Assembly as a delegate … he left it as Crown Prince.[24]

Grimond was absent when Davies announced his decision to step down. This was not made until he arrived at the Assembly, for he had told his agent in Montgomeryshire that he had no intention of resigning. Press Officer Phyllis Preston recalled that he was hoping that people would persuade him to carry on. She found him in an emotional state, declaring: 'it's getting too much for me.'[25] When she learned that he intended to make an announcement the next day, she rang Grimond to tell him. He replied that: 'Clem hasn't said a word to me.'

In a moving speech, Davies took his leave and was warmly and lengthily cheered. This may have been because 'gratitude for past services and relief at his decision to step down were mixed in about equal proportions.'[26] However, Roy Douglas believes that Davies' announcement was met with real sorrow by many delegates. For some Liberals there was a strong element of hypocrisy in the air. The platform party were 'weeping like taps when Davies made his farewell address. Ugh. Disgusting, and they all really wanted him gone.'[27] Other Liberals were also unhappy. Peter Billenness, a member of the Party Council, felt that Davies should have been allowed to go in his own time.[28]

The *Observer* thought that several delegates, despite applauding Davies' speech, were privately contrasting his rather nebulous and sentimental reaffirmation of basic Liberal principles with the sharp, concrete and practical view on industrial progress expressed by Grimond.[29]

The *Economist,* in similar vein, commented that: 'Pensioning off an old servant is a sad business, but when the Liberals have paid their tributes to Clement Davies, they are bound to feel relieved that their leadership, like that of the two main parties, has now moved into the next generation.'[30]

Most Liberals accepted that a change of leadership was overdue, to someone who could provide energy and a clear vision of the way the Liberal Party should develop. The only man who could do this was Grimond. Stephen Cawley, Chairman of the Steering Committee for the 1956 Assembly, recalled his emotions: 'Of course, we rejoiced; a young man had taken over from a tired, old one with a rather chequered career of political allegiance.'[31]

Was there an alternative?

Although necessary, it was nevertheless a painful transition for Davies. His friends stated that he was hurt by the manner of his going, for he had not gone of his own volition. Was there an alternative? In a party where there was no formal mechanism for removing a leader, it was bound to be a problem. Grimond recognised this: 'As there is no statutory limit on the time anyone can lead a party, and seldom any moment which all those involved see as the right moment to resign, a great deal depends on the character, judgement and goodwill of the leader … It does him [Davies] credit, however, that he accepted with such good grace the suggestion that it was time for a change.[32] Grimond subsequently wrote to Davies deploring the events (press articles, and so on) which led up to his decision to resign. He stated that: 'I do not believe it necessary for one moment that you should resign now.'[33]

Nevertheless, an increasingly ineffective elderly leader was removed from office against his will. Yet the impression was that 'Grimond would not play ball to push the old man out. Others had to wield the knife on his behalf.'[34] Party Council member Manuela Sykes believed that Grimond did not know the methods being used on his behalf.[35]

Clement Davies had all the tears and few of the joys of leadership. He held the pass during the most treacherous years in the party's history, and in doing so, helped to lay the foundations for the revival that took place under his successor. His legacy was that he passed on a separate independent national party further from extinction or engulfment by either of the major parties than when he took up the task. As the *News Chronicle* commented, 'Liberals are indebted to this man who refused to bow the knee and who recognised that the endless obituaries of the party were premature.'[36]

For the victories of the future, we must thank the guardians of the past. However, like many other political leaders before and since, his manner of departure was inglorious. He failed to realise that the curtain had come down and it was time to leave the stage and make way for another.

Geoffrey Sell is a college lecturer and a member of the Liberal Democrat History Grop executive. He completed a PhD thesis on Liberal Revival: British Liberalism and Jo Grimond 1956–67.

Notes:

1 *The Times* 22 November 1951.
2 *Liberal News* 22 May 1953, p. 1.
3 Letter from the late Dr T. Joyce, a former member of the Party National Executive, to author, 10 July 1989.
4 A. Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain Today* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1963) p. 120.
5 National Executive Committee Minutes, 14 January 1956; Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science.
6 *Ibid*.
7 Interview with David Penwarden, 7 August 1989.
8 Interview with Miss B. Corn, 23 August 1989.
9 Interview with late Lady Grimond, 22 October 1988.
10 *Marxism Today,* October 1986.
11 Newsletter of the Lancashire, Cheshire and North West Liberal Federation, 1 February 1956; Federation Archives, Manchester Central Library.
12 R. S. Milne and H. C. MacKenzie, *Marginal Seats, 1955* (London, 1958) pp 47–49.
13 Letter from Geoffrey Acland (Chairman of the National Executive) dated 21 March 1956 to Sir A. McFadyean; McFadyean Papers, British Library of Political and Economic Science.
14 Annual General Meeting of the Blackpool Liberal Association 28 March 1956; Federation Archives, Lancashire Record Office.
15 D. M. Roberts, *Clement Davies and the Liberal Party,* MA Thesis, University of Wales, 1975.
16 Letter from the late Dr. T. Joyce to author, *op.cit*.
17 Interview with D. le Foe, 3 November 1988.
18 Interview with G. Slack, 5 April 1989.
19 Interview with Richard Moore, 13 July 1996.
20 Interview with the late A. Holt, 22 April 1989.
21 *The Listener*, 13 September 1984, p. 17.
22 *News Chronicle*, 27 September 1956.
23 *Manchester Guardian*, 27 September 1956, p. 5.
24 *Ibid*.
25 Interview with the late Miss P. Preston, 5 November 1988.
26 A. Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma* (Plymouth: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966), p. 82.
27 Letter from the late Dr. T. Joyce, *op. cit*.
28 Interview with Peter Billenness, 28 July 1998.
29 *The Observer*, 30 September 1956, p. 9.
30 *The Economist*, 6 October 1956.
31 Letter dated 21 June 1993 from the Hon. S. Cawley to author.
32 M. Burton, *The Making of Liberal Party Policy 1945–80,* PhD thesis, University of Reading, 1983, p. 150.
33 Undated letter from Jo Grimond to Clement Davies; Clement Davies papers, National Library of Wales.
34 Based on an unpublished paper dated 30 September 1956 by Douglas Brown, former *News Chronicle* journalist; interview 29 July 1994.
35 Interview with Manuela Sykes, 23 August 1988.
36 *News Chronicle*, 1 October 1956.