

'A REAL TRIUMPH FOR



soon came to be regarded as a notable claim to fame. He wrote with unfailing wit, candour, irony and penetration, with a meticulous knowledge of public events and their potential significance, and of the thoughts and motives of public figures, most of whom accepted his barbed comments with good grace. The Junior Member possessed an uncanny knack of making his 'interviewees' speak in a totally authentic and credible way.

Western Mail readers, with whom these columns were a particular favourite, all realised that the exchanges were totally imaginary. One of the Junior Member's most consistent victims was David Lloyd George, who relished every word of the lively columns. A lengthy 'interview' with the Liberal leader entitled 'Mr Lloyd George and his Future', and subtitled 'May go to the Right – and he may go to the Left', was published in the *Western Mail* to mark his 68th birthday on 23 January 1931. It quoted telling remarks on the state of the Liberal Party.

Astonishingly, a journalist of the staff of *The Times* rather naïvely took the 'interview' at face value and referred to it in a leading article published the following day. As the paper had taken a consistently hostile attitude towards the Liberal leader over many months, it relished the opportunity to discredit his reputation still further and to perpetuate renewed rifts within an already feud-racked Liberal

Dr J. Graham Jones examines a bizarre episode in January 1931 when an editorial columnist on the staff of *The Times* took at face value an imaginary 'interview' with Liberal Party leader David Lloyd George published in the column of the mythical 'Junior Member for Treorchy' in the *Western Mail*, and assesses the reaction to it.

Perhaps the best-kept secret in the history of twentieth-century Welsh journalism is the precise identity of the celebrated mythical *Western Mail* columnist 'The Junior Member for Treorchy'. His lively pen graced the Welsh national daily newspaper from 1910 until the beginning of the Second World War and then resurfaced in 1959 for a further distinguished five-year stint. The Junior Member's speciality was the imaginary interview, generally with prominent politicians and public figures. These included party leaders like Stanley Baldwin and James Ramsay MacDonald, as well as many other ministers of the crown and Welsh backbench MPs. A reference in one of his columns, favourable or condemnatory,

OR MY OLD FRIEND'

Party. The episode immediately caused a minor sensation in the journalistic and political world. All the major national newspapers ran columns referring to the blatant misinterpretation, *The Times* felt compelled to publish a (somewhat half-hearted) apology to its mystified readership, and Lloyd George himself issued a press statement clarifying his personal position and congratulating 'his old friend the Member for Treorchy' on his 'real triumph'. Even in the proceedings of the House of Commons there were several pointed references to the Junior Member during the debates of the ensuing two weeks. The episode stubbornly refused to lie down, inevitably then causing intense embarrassment for the editorial team of *The Times*.

These events took place at an agonisingly difficult time both for the strife-ridden, notoriously quarrelsome Liberal Party and for Lloyd George personally who was at the time compelled to steer a perilously arduous political course.¹ In the general election of 30 May 1929, the Labour Party had captured 288 constituencies, the Conservatives 260 and the Liberals only 59. As Labour Premier James Ramsay MacDonald formed his second minority administration, the Liberals held the balance of power in the House of Commons. The agreement was that, in return for Liberal support, the Government would introduce legislation to reform the electoral system so that the Liberals would enjoy

fairer representation in the Commons more in line with their level of popular support in the country. Nationally it was a notably inauspicious period: the breakdown of the traditional staple industries in the 1920s had led to ever-spiralling unemployment levels, nearing a total of almost three million, a steady fall in wage and price levels and resultant social and community difficulties. All three mainstream political parties experienced bitter divisions, most notably the Liberals who were visibly falling apart, many of their MPs growing increasingly restive about keeping the Labour Government in power. There was a mounting challenge in their ranks to the most sacred of the party's traditional doctrines – free trade. There were repeated threats to break away and join forces with the Conservatives as National Liberals (as indeed was eventually to happen in the summer of 1931).

The relationship between the Liberals and the Government was a particular bone of contention during the late autumn and winter of 1930. Lloyd George, always the ultimate pragmatist, strove to shore up the Government (and thus avoid yet another general election likely to prove calamitous for the Liberals) without entering into a complex, full-scale coalition between the Liberal and Labour Parties. He retained a deep-rooted attachment to his party, not least because it provided him with a working organisation, a reservoir

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of traditional allegiance and a parliamentary following. He had no intention of going it alone in a political wilderness and believed that a strong Liberal Party might well be the vehicle to herald his return to high ministerial office.

The Labour Government lost no time in introducing simultaneously its Trade Disputes Bill and an Electoral Reform Bill containing provision for the alternative vote, on the understanding that the latter would buy Liberal acquiescence in the former. There was probably no firm 'pact', but many Liberals grew restive that Lloyd George was seeking closer relations with the Government than some of them wished. Further difficulties stemmed from the introduction by the Government in December 1930 of a highly divisive Coal Mines Bill which sought to bring together the Miners' Federation and the obdurate coalowners, but which contained many clauses wholly unacceptable to the Liberals.

In his 'interview' with the Junior Member for Treorchy the following diatribe was attributed to Lloyd George:

I am expected to accomplish the impossible with the Liberal Party. It has lost its *heart* as well as its tail. Between ourselves, I sometimes feel that its *stomach* has also gone, and yet I am being held responsible for its emaciated and truncated appearance.

Although I am the official leader of the party, men like

'A REAL TRIUMPH FOR MY OLD FRIEND'

[Edward] Grey, [Walter] Runciman, John Simon, and Donald Maclean, who in past days used to urge loyalty to the skipper as the first duty of every member of the party, are deliberately and even sullenly holding aloof from me and publicly flouting my authority. In the circumstances, I should be fully justified in emulating the example of Gladstone by throwing up the responsibility of the leadership in order to find leisure for contemplating the glories of the world to come.

Pressed by Treorchy to elaborate, he reconsidered: 'I live for what these eyes can see: this old earth is quite enough for me. And so in spite of the ruptures and cleavages with which the party is riven I mean to stick to its leadership.' At the close of the 'interview', Treorchy asked intently, 'But what about *your* future?', and received from LG a rather guarded reply:

I can only say in reply to your question that I am not prepared to commit myself *just yet* in regard to my future destiny. I may go the Right or I may drift to the Left. My decision will be determined by circumstances. In the meantime I must wait until I can discern *where the land lies*.²

As with many previous 'interviews' with both Lloyd George and other prominent politicians, the column published in the *Western Mail* on 23 January 1931 was widely read and aroused considerable interest. But everyone realised that it was imaginary. On the very same day was held the first day's debate on the Trade Disputes Bill which placed the Liberal MPs in an extremely difficult position, some of their number asserting that the measure would legalise the general strike. The next day in a lengthy editorial on the bill entitled 'The Liberal dilemma', *The Times* columnist concluded by referring to the 'remarkable interview which Mr Lloyd George accorded on his birthday to the representative of a local newspaper'. It quoted

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the Liberal leader's closing remarks as he answered Treorchy's questions, 'his countenance corrugated with his quizzical smile'. The column concluded, 'That no doubt correctly represents the present attitude of the Liberal Party, but circumstances seem to be conspiring to render it less comfortable than it sounds. In the interests of self-preservation it may even be wiser to take a doubtful course than to abstain from taking any course at all.'³

Reaction was predictably swift and highly amused. The *Sunday Times* the next day described the bizarre episode as 'one of the most entertaining political comedies of recent years'. Britain's premier daily newspaper had commented 'solemnly and with moral indignation' on a totally imaginary, fictitious interview. The paper, which had made no secret of its antipathy to Lloyd George, had indeed suffered 'a strange lapse'.⁴ The 'lapse' was all the more incredible as it was well known that the Junior Member had conducted 'imaginary humorous interviews with public personalities for many years in the *Western Mail*'.

It was also the *Sunday Times* that drew Lloyd George's attention to the editorial column in *The Times*. The Liberal leader considered the course of events hilarious. The interview had been a 'gorgeous piece of imagination. How *The Times* came to allow itself to be so deluded into the position it has created for itself is almost beyond credence.' But there was also, he insisted, 'a serious side to the joke. The suggestion embodied in the comment, "I am waiting until I can discern where the land lies" I strongly resent. It is inaccurate, without foundation, and misleading.'⁵

In a lengthy statement published in *The Observer* on the same day, Lloyd George spelled out his reaction:

The *Western Mail*, the leading Conservative Welsh journal, has, for over twenty years,

published a series of imaginary and humorous interviews by a writer calling himself 'the Member for Treorchy', with public men, including Mr Baldwin, Mr Ramsay MacDonald and all the political personalities of the day.

As a Welsh MP, I am supposed to have been very frequently 'interviewed'. These articles afford considerable amusement to the Welsh public of all parties. No sane person would ever be taken in by them, and, to be quite fair, the *Western Mail* does not intend that they should. But the editor of *The Times* has such a morbid obsession against me that he is hardly responsible when he comes to judge any tale to my detriment. So he solemnly quotes in a leading article a passage from one of the entertaining skits which appeared on Friday, and draws important inferences therefrom as to 'the attitude of the Liberal party'.

'COMPLETELY HOAXED'

The Editor of *The Times* has allowed himself to be completely hoaxed. It is a real triumph for my old friend, 'the Member for Treorchy', and I congratulate him. Tomorrow Welshmen of all parties will be holding their sides with laughter over the episode. Men with a sense of humour outside Wales will join in. The merriment will, however, be tempered with a sense of regret that a paper which still affects to be our leading journal should be thus befooled and debased by personal spite.⁶

The next day the Liberal newspaper the *News Chronicle* described the course of events as 'the most entertaining newspaper and political comedy for years ... It is not given to many of us to hoax so completely the stately *Times*.' How *The Times*' editorial columnist could have interpreted at face value the imaginary interview it considered 'incomprehensible'. But, it went on, 'the *Times* has really been hoaxing itself for a long

time by its odd practice of printing the real leaders of Liberalism on a back page, while according the largest type to exponents of "Liberalism", of whom most Liberals have never heard'.⁷

These claims did not lack justification. Certainly *The Times* had adopted an unfailingly hostile attitude towards Lloyd George. After the Liberal leader had addressed party candidates at the National Liberal Club a year earlier, *The Times* had slightly dismissed his words as 'a very skilful display of skating over thin ice', and it took advantage of the opportunity to launch a vehement attack upon the continued existence and means of control of the infamous Lloyd George political fund: 'Mr Lloyd George could have converted frowns into smiles at any time by divesting himself of the fund, the whole fund, and, of course, nothing but the fund'.⁸ His speech to the Liberal Party conference in October was 'so discreet that it lacked even a peroration'. Its tone revealed him as 'only too anxious to continue co-operation with the present Government'.⁹ A further speech to Liberal election candidates six weeks later had 'broadened the fence with self-righteousness until it looked quite comfortable to sit upon'. *The Times'* columnist went on:

Is the fence, however, really any broader? Is not the whole of Mr Lloyd George's case that the circumstances are unpropitious for a General Election, and is not the only deduction from his speech the fact that that there will not be an early election if he can help it? In spite of all his heroics, he has brought down to the materialistic plane of party tactics the problem whether the Liberal Party should keep the Government in office or not. The fact is not disguised by the argument that the Liberal attitude will be less misunderstood if the Government is a little less rude to the Liberals and the Liberals a little more rude to the Government.¹⁰

Small wonder, therefore, that the paper had relished the 'interview' published in the *Western Mail* on 23 January 1931 and had rushed with intemperate haste to pass comment upon it. On Monday 26 January, it had no alternative but to publish an apology. Even now, however, it trivially dismissed its Saturday column as no more than 'a light-hearted reference' to Lloyd George. Although it denied any 'personal spite' in its words, it regretted that it had interpreted the original 'interview' as 'emanating from himself and not from the writer of a skit'.¹¹ The *Western Mail* was unimpressed. Far from being 'a light-hearted reference', *The Times'* column had been 'solemn and severe' in its censure upon Lloyd George and the Liberal Party, while the Liberal leader himself had interpreted its words as 'further evidence of a morbid obsession against himself cherished for some reason or other in Printing House Square'.

Over the weekend the *Western Mail* had found itself bombarded with insistent appeals to reveal the true identity of the Junior Member for Treorchy. Predictably, it refused to budge.¹² There were also repeated repercussions in the proceedings of the House of Commons. On Monday 26 January, following a question on the advertising of the British Industries Fair, Ernest Brown, Liberal MP for Leith, asked in a supplementary question to the minister responsible, 'Whether he is arranging as a means of advertising this fair, for another spurious article to be written by the hon. member for Treorchy in the *Western Mail* and the *Times*'.¹³ During the same day, the Junior Member was also mentioned by Winston Churchill, the former Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, during a lengthy speech on India. In the course of the ensuing debate the Junior Member was mentioned on no fewer than four occasions and attracted chanting choruses of 'Treorchy' as successive speakers found their perorations inter-

rupted by excited MPs.¹⁴ Two days later, during the debate on the Trade Disputes Bill, Churchill relentlessly taunted Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour Prime Minister, continuing:

I was not invited myself to the conference which took place last week in Downing-street between the Prime Minister and the leader of the Liberal party, but my hon. friend the Member for Treorchy – (laughter) – gave me a true account of the incidents between the two party leaders. After the usual compliments the Prime Minister said, 'We have never been colleagues. We have never been friends, at least what we call holiday friends. But we have both been Prime Minister, and dog doesn't eat dog (Laughter). Just look at the Bill the Trade Unions and the wild fellows have foisted upon me. Do me a service and I will never forget it. Take it upstairs and cut its dirty throat'. (Uproarious laughter and cheers).¹⁵

The laughter in the Commons chamber continued for several minutes as Churchill continued his account of the imaginary Downing Street interview, but his words failed to bring a smile to the face of the Prime Minister who 'sat with folded arms and immobile features' on the Government benches while his Cabinet colleagues, J. H. Thomas and Vernon Hartshorn, MP for Ogmore, laughed loudly. Both the Commons and the Peers' Gallery were packed as Churchill spoke. Some of those present even accused him of being the true Junior Member for Treorchy – to his great amusement.¹⁶

The following week, during the debate in the Commons on the Electoral Reform Bill, Gordon Lang, Labour MP for Oldham and a native of Chepstow, spoke on the proposal to abolish double-member constituencies, concluding his speech, 'Finally, all I hope is that with the abolition of senior and junior members for

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'A REAL TRIUMPH FOR MY OLD FRIEND'

the same constituency, we shall not get rid of that representative who adds so much to the gaiety of nations and, lately, has so generously hoodwinked so many of us – “the Junior Member for Treorchy”, a comment which provoked a sonorous ‘Hear, hear’ from Lloyd George which reverberated around the Commons chamber. The Junior Member, clearly, would not lie down.¹⁷

Dr J. Graham Jones is Senior Archivist and Head of the Welsh Political Archive at the National Library of Wales.

- 1 On Lloyd George's role at this specific juncture, see John Campbell, *Lloyd George: the Goat in the Wilderness, 1922–1931* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), pp. 278–80; Colin Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George: the Diary of A. J. Sylvester, 1931–45* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 23; Peter Rowland, *Lloyd George* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1975), pp. 665–66.
- 2 *Western Mail*, 23 January 1931.
- 3 *The Times*, 24 January 1931, p. 13, col. c.
- 4 *Sunday Times*, 25 January 1931.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *The Observer*, 25 January 1931.
- 7 *News Chronicle*, 26 January 1931.
- 8 *The Times*, 21 January 1930, p. 15, col. d.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 18 October 1930, p. 13, col. b.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 6 December 1930, p. 13, col. b.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 26 January 1931, p. 11, col. d.
- 12 *Western Mail*, 26 January 1931.
- 13 *House of Commons Debates, 5th series*, Vol. 247 (26 January 1931), cc. 595–96.
- 14 *Ibid.*, cc. 661 ff.
- 15 *Ibid.*, c. 1022 (28 January 1931).
- 16 *Western Mail*, 29 January 1931.
- 17 *House of Commons Debates, 5th series*, Vol. 247 (2 February 1931), c. 1511; *Western Mail*, 4 February 1931.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

Cornish Methodism and Cornish political identity, 1918–1960s.

Researching the relationship through oral history. *Kayleigh Milden, Institute of Cornish Studies, Hayne Corfe Centre, Sunningdale, Truro TR1 3ND; KMSMilden@aol.com.*

History of the Liberal Party. Roy Douglas (author of *The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* and a dozen or so other historical books) is working on a new book about the Liberal Party and its history. This will trace events from the rather indeterminate 19th century date when the party came into existence to a point as close as possible to the present. He believes that the story requires attention to be given not only to the glamorous deeds of major politicians but also to such mundane matters as party organisation and finance. ideas, please! *Roy Douglas, 26 Downs Road, Coulsdon, Surrey CR5 1AA; 01737 552 888.*

Hon H. G. Beaumont (MP for Eastbourne 1906–10). Any information welcome – especially from anyone having access to material about the history of Liberalism in Eastbourne – particularly on his political views (he stood as a Radical). *Tim Beaumont, 40 Elms Road, London SW4 9EX.*

Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65). Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. *Dr A. Howe, Department of International History, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE; a.howe@lse.ac.uk.* (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, see www.lse.ac.uk/collections/cobdenLetters/).

Liberal foreign policy in the 1930s. Focussing particularly on Liberal anti-appeasers. *Michael Kelly, 12 Collinbridge Road, Whitewell, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim BT36 7SN; mmjkelly@msn.com.*

Liberal Party and the wartime coalition 1940–45. Sources, particularly on Sinclair as Air Minister, and on Harcourt Johnstone, Dingle Foot, Lord Sherwood and Sir Geoffrey Maunder (Sinclair's PPS) particularly welcome. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, Richmond TW9 4DL; ian.hunter@curtishunter.co.uk.*

Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16. *Andrew Gardner, 17 Upper Ramsey Walk, Canonbury, London N1 2RP; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39. *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

Political life and times of Josiah Wedgwood MP. Study of the political life of this radical MP, hoping to shed light on the question of why the Labour Party replaced the Liberals as the primary popular representatives of radicalism in the 1920s. *Paul Mulvey, 112 Richmond Avenue, London N1 0LS; paulmulvey@yahoo.com.*

Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935.

Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Cllr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk.*

SDP in Central Essex. Contact with anyone who had dealings with the area, and in particular as many former SDP members of the area as possible, with a view to asking them to take part in a short questionnaire. Official documents from merger onwards regarding the demise of the local SDP branches and integration with the Liberals would also be appreciated. *Elizabeth Wood, The Seasons, Park Wood, Doddinghurst, Brentwood, Essex CM15 0SN; Lizawsea@aol.com.*

Student radicalism at Warwick University. Particularly the files affair in 1970. Interested in talking to anybody who has information about Liberal Students at Warwick in the period 1965–70 and their role in campus politics. *Ian Bradshaw, History Department, University of Warwick, CV4 7AL; I.Bradshaw@warwick.ac.uk*

Welsh Liberal Tradition – A History of the Liberal Party in Wales 1868–2003. Research spans thirteen decades of Liberal history in Wales but concentrates on the post-1966 formation of the Welsh Federal Party. Any memories and information concerning the post-1966 era or even before welcomed. The research is to be published in book form by Welsh Academic Press. *Dr Russell Deacon, Centre for Humanities, University of Wales Institute Cardiff, Cyncoed Campus, Cardiff CF23 6XD; rdeacon@uwic.ac.uk.*