

Central Lancashire Online Knowledge (CLoK)

Title	A 'Strange Death' Foretold (or the Not So 'Strange Death' of Liberal Wales): Liberal Decline, the Labour Ascendancy and Electoral Politics in South Wales, 1922-1924
Type	Article
URL	https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/4392/
DOI	-
Date	2012
Citation	Meredith, Stephen Clive (2012) A 'Strange Death' Foretold (or the Not So 'Strange Death' of Liberal Wales): Liberal Decline, the Labour Ascendancy and Electoral Politics in South Wales, 1922-1924. <i>North American Journal of Welsh Studies</i> , 7 (-). pp. 18-37. ISSN 15548112
Creators	Meredith, Stephen Clive

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. -

For information about Research at UCLan please go to <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/>

All outputs in CLoK are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including Copyright law. Copyright, IPR and Moral Rights for the works on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the <http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/policies/>

A 'STRANGE DEATH' FORETOLD (OR THE NOT SO 'STRANGE DEATH' OF LIBERAL WALES): LIBERAL DECLINE, THE LABOUR ASCENDANCY AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN SOUTH WALES, 1922-1924

Stephen Meredith

Abstract

This essay revisits debates concerning the rapid decline of the historic and once powerful Liberal Party and its replacement by the Labour Party as the main anti-Conservative, progressive party of the state around the fulcrum of the First World War. The particular context and lens for the analysis are what have been termed the 'mining valleys' of South Wales, from Llanelli in the east to Pontypool in the west, where the startling transformation of British progressive politics was perhaps no more apparent. Discussion and debate over the precise reasons and departure point of unprecedented British party political change in this period have continued unabated, but the electoral and local political and social advances of Labour in the South Wales coalfield in the raft of elections between 1922 and 1924 facilitated, consolidated and embedded the longer process of progressive realignment.

Introduction

In his classic work of party political change in the years immediately prior to and following World War One (WWI), George Dangerfield identifies and charts what he describes as 'The Strange Death of Liberal England'. Dangerfield contends that in the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the 'Great War' a variety of external political and internal party difficulties and developments contributed to the uniquely rapid decline of a major political party, even at the moment of its greatest triumph.¹ Trevor Wilson similarly identifies a rapid period of Liberal electoral and political decline, but identifies the impact, consequences and aftermath of the war itself as essential factors in the Liberal decline.² Although Wilson concedes that the Liberal Party did not appear to be in rudest of health by 1914 in terms of ideological coherence and its local party organisation, it was the events and developments of WW1 and its aftermath that killed historic Liberalism. The demands of total war destroyed the Liberal Party, damaged morale and created a crisis and division of leadership. Restrictive measures of the state in war shook the traditional and still

Stephen Meredith is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Central Lancashire. His research focuses primarily on the history of the Labour Party, revisionist social democracy and British 'progressive' politics. He is the author of *Labours Old and New: The Parliamentary Right of the British Labour Party 1970-79 and the Roots of New Labour* (Manchester University Press, 2008). He hails from Blaenavon in South Wales, historic industrial town and world heritage site.

¹ George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961 [1936]).

² Trevor Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914-1935* (London: Collins, 1966).

prominent Liberal belief in individual liberty, and left the way open for Labour to emerge out of war to take advantage of social and political change.

These arguments offer different perspectives of a perennial question of electoral and political realignment around the fulcrum of 1914.³ The first interpretation suggests that the various demands of social and political change and the challenge of Labour had done their worst before 1914. The second interpretation argues that war after 1914 ultimately killed Liberalism and opened the way for the Labour Party regardless of challenges and crises before 1914. Either way, the emergence and role of the Labour Party is a crucial part of the debate and story of Liberal decline, and perhaps nowhere was this transformation more visual and complete than in the region of the South Wales coalfield. The decline of the Liberal Party and rise of Labour were inextricably linked. In the context of questions of Liberal political decline and Labour ascendancy, this article seeks to examine developments of electoral politics in South Wales, or in what have loosely been termed the mining valleys of South Wales, from Llanelli in the west to Pontypool in the east, in the years immediately following WWI to chart the progress and assess the nature and extent of Labour's emergence in these years as the 'newly' dominant political force in the area. As two recent historians of Labour's emergence as a party of government suggest, '[t]here is a sound case for arguing that 1924 marks the final demise of Liberalism...Labour [had] successfully outstripped the Liberal Party as a serious contender for the progressive vote...completing the process begun a quarter of a century before'.⁴ The argument here is that the electoral advances of the period 1922-24 in the context of the changing working-class milieu of the region expressed, consolidated and formalised this remarkable party and political transformation.

Political Context and Developments

Between the end of WWI and the general election of October 1924, the face of British party politics was transformed. In the space of these five or six years, Britain witnessed a coalition government led by a Liberal Welshman and elected on the tide of an unusual mix of bellicose patriotism and egalitarianism, the Conservative Bonar Law succeeded Lloyd George as Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin launched his party into a disastrous tariff election and Labour's Ramsay Macdonald presided over a short-lived, first Labour government. In this period of rapid political turnover and transition the fate of the Liberal Party it seems was sealed, and with the outcome of the election of October 1924 the Liberal Party was fatally wounded as a credible electoral force.⁵ This process was perhaps nowhere more vividly illustrated than in South Wales, and at the end of the war Welsh politics was on the verge of a dramatic transformation. The ascendancy of the Liberal Party, the dominant feature of Welsh politics for two generations from the 1868 general election to

³ Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1-5.

⁴ John Shepherd and Keith Laybourn, *Britain's First Labour Government* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 22.

⁵ Chris Cook, *The Age of Alignment: Electoral Politics in Britain 1922-1929* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 3.

WWI, was to be shattered forever and replaced by a new radical tradition increasingly entwined with indigenous class and industrial identities and loyalties.⁶

Modern Welsh politics has been dominated by two main characteristics; the completeness of the Liberal ascendancy in Wales in the years down to 1914 and the unrelieved nature of the Liberal decline thereafter. In the context of wider changes of ideology and policy in the new century, the aims and values of Liberalism in Wales showed comparatively slight change up to 1914 and, despite the increase of industrial unrest and conflicts such as the miners' stoppage of 1898, Welsh politicians remained wedded to traditional themes of disestablishment, temperance, modified home rule and nostalgic memories of the 'great election' of 1868. After 1918, unlike parts of England and Scotland, Wales has shown no consistent sign of a Liberal revival in the face of the pervasive challenge of Labour.⁷

The Liberal Party has long been supplanted in industrial South Wales, so-much-so that political scientists in pre-Devolution days discussed the concept of 'one-partyism' in Wales.⁸ In establishing this particular feature of Welsh politics, the developments of the years immediately following WWI were crucially important in determining the respective electoral position and prospects of the two parties. From the 1885 election to that of December 1910, the Liberal Party won both a majority of votes and seats in Wales. Thereafter, its influence rapidly waned, and from 1918 onwards was replaced as the dominant progressive electoral and political force by the Labour Party. Wales was a relatively slow starter in Labour politics prior to the coal lock-out of 1898. It had been but a section of a broad based Liberal-led coalition, and trade union leaders such as William Abraham ('Mabon') of the Cambrian miners were inseparable in their outlook from middle-class, non-conformist Liberals. Even Keir Hardie's first election for Merthyr Tydfil in the 'khaki' election of 1900 owed far more to Liberal votes than to the strength of independent Labour in South Wales.⁹ However, the years of Taff Vale and Tonypany, together with the Bethesda lock-out in the Penrhyn quarries, brought a profound shift in industrial and political attitudes. By 1909 the syndicalists of the Plebs League were active in the Rhondda and Aberdare valleys, advocating direct industrial action rather than the constitutional method, and in the prolonged Cambrian strike of 1910-11 their influence within the councils of the South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF), itself growing in influence in the industrial and political life of the valleys by the day, became increasingly powerful.¹⁰ Before the outbreak of WWI, radicalism rather than socialism formed the ideological basis of the

⁶ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 277-83.

⁷ Kenneth O. Morgan, 'The New Liberalism and the Challenge of Labour: The Welsh Experience 1885-1929', *Welsh History Review*, 6, 3 (1973), 159.

⁸ Ian McAllister, 'The Labour Party in Wales: The Dynamics of One-Partyism', *Llafur*, 3, 2 (1981), 90-5.

⁹ For a full account, see Kenneth O. Fox, 'Labour and Merthyr's Khaki Election of 1900', *Welsh History Review*, 2, 4 (1965), 351-366; also see Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Labour's Early Struggles in South Wales: Some New Evidence, 1900-8', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 17, 4 (1972), 219-27.

¹⁰ For industrial and political developments in South Wales in this period, see Ness Edwards, *History of the South Wales Miners' Federation, Vol. 1* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1938).

labour movement with the consequence that the Liberals could successfully tap the support of the new urban working class, particularly in South Wales.¹¹ With the decline of the Liberal Party, due in no small part to poor constituency organisation and a negatively anti-socialist appeal, the Labour Party emerged as heir to its power, managing to expedite the transition with ease as it was infused with something of the radical, non-conformist tradition which was at the heart of the Liberal appeal and possessed natural affinity with the social and industrial configuration of the community.¹² In 1918, the fifty-seven strong parliamentary Labour Party included nine Welsh MPs. From 1922 onwards, Labour dominated the parliamentary representation of Wales with its monopoly of power throughout the coalfield. Even in the election disaster of 1931, following the ignominious fall of Ramsay MacDonald's second minority Labour government, Labour largely retained and strengthened its strongholds in South Wales on the basis of a trenchant class awareness and opposition to a perceived 'bankers ramp' and prospect of a largely Conservative National Government headed by Labour's own 'class traitor'.¹³ Consequently, Welsh influence in the Labour Party in the 1930s was ubiquitous.

The Political and Electoral Background

In the final pre-war election of December 1910 the Liberal Party was still by far the most dominant political force in Wales, winning twenty-six of the thirty-four seats, as well as contributing by withdrawal of Liberal candidates to the five Labour victories, and the majority of mining seats remained Liberal.¹⁴ It was in the years and rash of elections following the 'Great War' that the Labour Party increased and consolidated its electoral representation in South Wales, particularly from 1922 onwards. The transformation was so complete that Labour MPs representing the divisions of the South Wales coalfield in the inter-war years enjoyed a security of tenure rarely paralleled in modern British political history. Coalfield seats displayed a 94.3 per cent loyalty to Labour between 1918 and 1935 based on an unusually high voter turnout hovering around 78 per cent between 1918 and 1929 and compared very favourably with the loyalty of other coalfield regions to Labour, and from 1922 the fidelity was total.¹⁵ It seemed that death, voluntary retirement or the decision to move to a more conducive constituency, as in the case of Ramsay MacDonald who represented Aberavon from 1922 to 1929, were the only reasons for sitting members to lose their seats; rejection at the polls was almost unheard of. Even those Labour MPs whose performance was less than satisfactory were able to rely on large electoral majorities. One such example involved Evan Davies at Ebbw Vale in advance of the 1923 general election. When it became known that Davies was to be opposed by a strong Liberal candidate, Labour fears were expressed that the seat may be lost due to Davies' 'shameful neglect of

¹¹ Cyril Parry, *The Radical Tradition in Welsh Politics: Study of Liberal and Labour Politics in Gwynedd, 1900-20* (Hull: University of Hull, 1970), 71.

¹² See Kenneth O. Morgan, 'The Twilight of Welsh Liberalism: Lloyd George and the Wee Frees', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 24 (1968), 389-405.

¹³ D. H. Close, 'The Realignment of the British Electorate in 1931', *History*, 67, 221 (1982), 393-404; Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 277-80; Richard Burton Archives, Swansea (hereafter RBA), Gwilym Richard Miscellaneous Letters and Papers 14/15, Letter from Gwilym Richard to Ramsay MacDonald, 14 November 1931.

¹⁴ Michael Kinnear, *The British Voter: An Atlas and Survey since 1885* (London: Batsford, 1968), 32-3.

¹⁵ Chris Cook, 'Wales and the General Election of 1923', *Welsh History Review*, 4, 4 (1969), 393-4.

duties both at the House and in the constituency'.¹⁶ In the event, Davies was returned comfortably with a majority of almost 8,000 votes.

The general election of 1922 offers a prudent starting point to analyse the upsurge and consolidation of Labour's vote in South Wales following WWI. 1922 witnessed the break-up of the Coalition Government established in 1918 and the resumption of traditional party politics, and it was in 1922 that Labour doubled its representation in Wales from nine to eighteen (more than half the available seats). Initially, however, the rapid transformation in the dominance of one political creed to another in South Wales was obscured by the continuation of coalition politics after the war and the 1918 'coupon' election. The Prime Minister, Lloyd George, was the most celebrated Welshman of the day, and the 'coupon' election he fought with his Conservative allies in December 1918 was viewed in the contemporary press as a 'ceremony of Congratulation' for 'the man who had won the war'.¹⁷ The campaign was marked in Wales, as elsewhere, by intense patriotic frenzy. In Cardiff, there were 'Hang the Kaiser' rituals, and in the Cardiff Central constituency three candidates claimed to possess the prized 'coupon'.¹⁸ In Aberdare, the newly enfranchised female electors were urged that a vote for the Independent Labour Party (ILP) for example represented the acquittal of the 'murderous Huns' who had defiled women and tortured Welsh troops. In an atmosphere of national fervour and patriotism, pacifists among Labour Party candidates experienced a particularly harsh reception, including physical assaults by electors caught up in a national lust for revenge and calls for the immediate expulsion of all 'aliens'. In Aberdare, C.B. Stanton representing the pro-Coalition National Democratic and Labour Party was able to defeat the Labour candidate with a majority of more than 16,000 votes (but the result was reversed in 1922).¹⁹

The outcome of the 1918 election gave the Coalition an enormous majority. The electorate applied a straightforward test unprecedented for parties and individual candidates alike, that of the test of their war record.²⁰ Labour won few seats of its own in 1918, as eleven of their victories were unopposed and several others were opposed only by unpopular left-wing 'socialist' candidates. Even Labour success in the mining regions of South Wales, West Lancashire and West Yorkshire was only partial.²¹ In Wales, it was the same story. The result provided the Coalition with a huge endorsement. In the thirty-six Welsh constituencies, 'couponed' supporters of the Coalition were returned in twenty-five, largely with vast majorities. Twenty of these were Coalition Liberals, four were Conservative and Unionist, and one represented the 'patriotic' National Democratic and Labour Party. Only one Asquithian Liberal was returned. The Labour Party captured a total of nine seats in Wales, all in the south of the principality, and 30.8 per cent of votes cast, itself a notable advance. Welsh miners in particular loomed large in the parliamentary Labour Party's recruitment of only fifty-seven, but even those Labour members returned in

¹⁶ National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, E. T. John Papers 4049, Letter from G. Lang to E. T. John, 28 November 1923.

¹⁷ *Welsh Outlook*, January 1919, 6-7.

¹⁸ *South Wales Daily News*, 23 November 1918.

¹⁹ *Merthyr Express*, 14 December 1918.

²⁰ *The Times*, 30 December 1918.

²¹ Kinnear, *The British Voter*, 38.

1918 conformed to the general pattern of the election. All were strong supporters of the late war and were all of 'moderate' political disposition, while pacifist candidates were decimated.²² Labour representation in Wales, however, rose from four to nine, and the Labour tide across the country was gradually rising. Labour's vote had now reached 180,875 compared to the Liberal's 258,833 (Coalition and Independent), but still the 'genuine' or 'real' position of the Labour Party in South Wales remained obscured. Labour members elected in 1918 were those whose patriotism was beyond suspicion, while pacifists and ILP candidates were heavily defeated. In spite of increasing the party's representation in Parliament, the 1918 general election served to some extent to conceal the experience and effects of the wartime years which had been momentous for Labour industrially and politically in South Wales and the impact of new developments within the party such as a new constitution, a national machinery and national programme.²³ Even Labour's increased national and regional representation in 1918 confirmed and owed much to the immediate post-war mood of jingoism and endorsement of king and country - a strange combination of bellicose patriotism perhaps mixed with a hint of egalitarianism.

The General Election of November 1922

It was with the fall of the Coalition and resumption of regular party politics in October 1922 that the position of the Labour Party in South Wales became more apparent, as the party began to increase and consolidate its strength and representation in the mining communities. Throughout 1922, the Conservative and Unionist element in the government became increasingly restless with the coalition arrangements, which reached a head with the Chanak Crisis in September. In the Newport by-election on 18 October, an Independent Conservative unexpectedly defeated the Labour candidate and forced the Coalition Liberal to the bottom of the poll.²⁴ Frustrated by the constraints of coalition and encouraged by the Newport result, the Conservatives voted at the famous Carlton Club meeting on 19 October to end the pact. Bonar Law replaced Lloyd George as Prime Minister, and on 26 October Parliament was dissolved and a general election campaign began.

It soon became apparent that the frenzy of the 'coupon' election was a highly misleading index of the political mood of post-war Wales. In spite of the Coalition victory in the Cardiganshire by-election of February 1921, a bitter contest of the rival Coalition and Independent Liberal forces deepening this division within the party as a factor in the long term decline of Liberalism in Wales,²⁵ there had been a gradual erosion of government support. Lloyd George no longer appeared the god-like figure of a few years earlier, and the short-lived 'ceremony of congratulation' appeared over. The seemingly transitory nature of the results of 1918 and the Liberal 'success' in Wales was soon emphasised by the

²² Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 180-1.

²³ For details of national and local developments of the Labour movement in this period, see Henry Pelling, *A Short History of the Labour Party* (London: St Martin's Press, 1961), 42-7; Ness Edwards, *History of the South Wales Miners' Federation*, Arthur Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1960).

²⁴ John Ramsden, 'The Newport By-election and the Fall of the Coalition', in Chris Cook and John Ramsden, eds., *By-elections in British Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 14-42.

²⁵ Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Cardiganshire Politics: the Liberal Ascendancy 1885-1923', *Ceredigion*, 5, 4 (1967), 333-7.

advance of Labour in a succession of by-elections between 1918 and 1922. Stirred by unrest in the coalfield, Labour appeared poised to challenge the Liberals in every industrial seat in Wales. No region reacted more violently, for instance, to the bitter aftermath of 'Black Friday' and the perceived broken promises of the report of the Sankey Commission than South Wales, now under the militant union leadership of A. J. Cook.²⁶ An extremely close contest in the Swansea East constituency in the summer of 1919 witnessed the Coalition Liberal candidate winning narrowly in a poll that showed a 5 per cent swing to Labour, and in December 1920 Labour retained Abertillery with a much enhanced majority. When the seat at Ebbw Vale fell vacant in 1920, the Liberals failed even to contest it, and the Labour candidate, the much-maligned and seemingly fortunate Evan Davies, was returned unopposed. Later in the same year, Labour comfortably retained Rhondda West over a Coalition Conservative Unionist running with Liberal support, and in August 1921 a Labour candidate with a pacifist ILP background doubled its majority in Caerphilly. Two by-elections in July 1922 saw Labour retain Gower and take Pontypridd with a majority of above 4,000 over the Liberals in a contest won by the parliamentary agent of the SWMF.

This series of conclusive results appeared to announce unmistakably that the phase of Welsh politics inaugurated by the 'great election' of 1868 had come to a close and a new one was beginning. Limited Liberal political arguments around themes of constitutionalism and the 'socialist' threat appeared to fall on deaf ears. The seemingly sterile anti-Bolshevism line that characterised much of the Liberal campaign in South Wales in these years had minimal effect, just as Snowden's 'Bolshevism run mad' appeal was to have even in the frenzied circumstances of 1931. Defeated Liberals were slowly coming to terms with the 'real' issues and causes of pay and working conditions that occupied the 'mind of the miner', and it appeared that while Liberal organisation at the constituency level was moribund every miners' lodge was fully-equipped and poised for battle. None of this bode well for the Liberal Party in South Wales for a general election.²⁷

In the period preceding the first post-war general election contested under the normal rules of party engagement, Liberal weakness in a number of respects in comparison with its main progressive competitor was evident. While the Labour Party had made significant advances in almost every part of South Wales, maximising its appeal and tuning the party machinery, Liberal organisation suffered from both poor structure and lack of morale. Equally, they suffered from the illusory effects of the 1918 election in which they won twenty-one of the thirty-six Welsh seats, but twenty of these were awarded to 'couponed' supporters of the Lloyd George Coalition elected on the tide of the immediate post-war mood. In terms of the new wider and deeper issues of the post-war world, they appeared to be a party that had lost its sense of acuity and purpose, and the old Welsh programme of the traditional campaigns against the brewers, landlords and 'alien' church appeared irrelevant and out-of-touch. As the reality of their political situation gradually sunk in and disillusion mounted in Liberal ranks throughout 1921 and 1922, some Liberals

²⁶ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics 1868-1922* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1963), 296-7; Paul Davies, *A. J. Cook* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 35-6.

²⁷ Kenneth O. Morgan, 'The New Liberalism and the Challenge of Labour: The Welsh Experience, 1885-1929', in Kenneth Brown, ed., *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 176.

began to comprehend the full extent of Liberal organisational and ideological and programmatic decay. It was recognised that the Liberals had been so inactive that they had done little to counter the forward march of Labour in the South Wales valleys, and in several constituencies party organisation was only notable by its absence, without full-time agents or any form of political activity. Any faint hope of recovery, it was believed, must be based on reorganisation on new lines and development of an industrial policy.²⁸ When Lloyd George fell abruptly from power in October 1922, Coalition Liberals in Wales were in a desperate plight and the rump of Independent Asquithian Liberals had struggled for any kind of foundation.

Although in many ways it marked a return to the normal business of party politics and competition after the interruption of war and the prior 'coupon' election, the general election of 1922 was described in the contemporary press as representing 'a state of confusion unknown in any former election [in which]the old party lines are gone'.²⁹ Four main parties, Conservative, Labour, Liberal and National Liberal, contested the election, but who was fighting who and over what, was difficult to determine, and so the election rested not on policies or programme but 'almost entirely on atmosphere, personalities and party image'.³⁰ As no party presented candidates in more than two-thirds of available constituencies and the campaign 'was characterised by a systematic effort by the leaders of all three anti-socialist parties to present as few policies as possible', there was also a sense in which local issues were magnified in importance and local agreements became inevitable, adding to the confusion of the contest. It has been described as arguably 'the most complex election' of the twentieth century.³¹

The fall of the Coalition left both Lloyd George and his Liberal supporters without a power base and, despite Alfred Mond's plea that they should contest the election as a reunited party, the majority of ex-Coalition Liberals decided to align with pro-Coalition Conservatives during the campaign. Lloyd George was left without clear direction in which to lead his troops, and many of his pre-election speeches appeared to represent an exercise to buy himself time as opposed to the offer of a fitting and constructive programme. The Independent Liberal group also experienced an extremely difficult position. They made a determined attempt to re-establish themselves as a major party by fielding an impressive 328 candidates, but found it virtually impossible to establish a clear and consistent attitude to the other parties and, since they were unable to determine the principal enemy, their opposition to the other groups was muffled. Without a radical programme to challenge Labour on the left and commanded by a leader who expected and even welcomed defeat, the followers of Asquith made little impact on the electorate.³² Labour, in contrast, presented its highest number of candidates in the election and presented a united front and a programme of sorts to the electorate. Bonar Law, too, as leader of the newly unchained

²⁸ The National Archive, London (hereafter TNA), Lloyd George Papers F/37/3/17, Letter from Alfred Mond to Lloyd George, 10 August 1922.

²⁹ *The Nation*, 8 November 1922.

³⁰ John Campbell, *Lloyd George: the Goat in the Wilderness* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), 52.

³¹ Michael Kinnear, *The Fall of Lloyd George: the Political Crisis of 1922* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 138.

³² *Manchester Guardian*, 10 November 1922,

Conservative Party, was able to sit back, say little and rely on the growing anti-Lloyd George sentiment to return him to office.

In Wales, the Coalition Liberals were again in a parlous state. The government of which they were part had encountered a gradual erosion of support from Caernarfon to Cardiff, and there were stories of Liberal Associations defecting to its Independent Liberal variant. By August 1922, Alfred Mond was able to report to Lloyd George that many South Wales (Independent) 'Wee Frees' were openly supporting Labour and that Coalition Liberal Party organisation in the coalfield was in a state of collapse.³³ The process of internal disintegration counted severely against the Welsh Liberal Party and, intensified by civil war between supporters and opponents of Lloyd George, local Liberal Associations withered away. Arguably more than in any other part of Britain they were ill-equipped to meet the new challenge of Labour and, on the eve of the election, Liberal organisation in many constituencies presented a dismal outlook. In Abertillery, for example, following the heavy defeat of the Liberal candidate at the 1920 by-election, the Liberals failed to even nominate a candidate to contest the seat in 1922.³⁴ In Caerphilly, local Liberal organisation was so bereft that, while a Coalition Liberal had stood in the 1921 by-election, a Conservative candidate was now presented with the task of confronting the Labour Party.³⁵ At Merthyr, an Independent and Anti-Socialist candidate received the nomination of the local Coalition Liberal Association, which was on the point of collapse, and the Merthyr Conservative Association.³⁶ In Bedwellty, the Conservative candidate was presented with a free run against Labour, and there were similar arrangements in Ebbw Vale, the scene of two previous unopposed returns for Labour. Whether or not due in part to the weakness of Liberal organisation, Coalition Liberals and Conservatives continued to indulge in local association 'anti-socialist' electoral pacts such as those in Llanelli and Rhondda East in which the National Liberal candidate was presented with a straight fight with Labour.³⁷ Nevertheless, it was clear that Liberal organisation and influence was severely diminished, a development mirrored by a corresponding rise in the strength and influence of the Labour Party. Even in its traditional rural strongholds, Liberalism was on the defensive.

In contrast to what seemed to be the Liberal obsession with a negative anti-Bolshevism message, the Labour Party campaigned fiercely for combating industrial depression and rising unemployment, effectively attributing much of the blame to the reparations and war debts policy of the late Coalition government. Labour was also now able to derive considerable advantage from the fact that Lloyd George's esteem had dropped in South Wales as elsewhere, and perhaps most important to Labour's immediate and long-term benefit was the consolidation of new ties of social identity and ideological association. The export market for South Wales coal had shrunk and the miners were forced to fight a bitter rearguard action to defend the gains they had made in the boom conditions during and immediately following the war, and their pride and solidarity, which had once presented a barrier to the spread of socialism, now spurred it on. Old bonds (and core

³³ Alfred Mond to Lloyd George, 10 August 1922.

³⁴ *South Wales News*, 2 November 1922.

³⁵ *Glamorgan Free Press*, 5 November 1922.

³⁶ *Western Mail*, 6 November 1922.

³⁷ *Western Mail*, 7 November 1922.

Liberal themes) of religion and nationality appeared increasingly less important than those of industrial solidarity and class identity. Although the war-focused 'accidentalists' of the 'Liberal decline' literature would of course disagree on the point and primary cause of transformation, the more embedded 'inevitalist' case argues that the gradual emergence and persistence of class-based politics before and after 1914 as the consequence of 'long-term social and economic changes' allowed Labour to gradually free itself of the yoke of Liberal patronage and respond to the development and demands of escalating industrial and class solidarity and militancy.³⁸ Liberalism was struggling to continue to garner 'the working-class support which it once commanded' and to arrest the development of the Labour Party, and Labour's 'inexorable political growth...was born upon the development of class politics, which had seen trade unionism, and through it the working class, attach itself to the Labour Party'.³⁹

In South Wales, developments such as the publication of *The Miners' Next Step* had helped to galvanise and radicalise the mining community and miners' unionism around ideas of explicit class-based, anti-capitalist labour organisation. Although it promoted syndicalist themes of revolutionary industrial organisation and takeover beyond the more conventional reformist aims of union leaders and Labour representatives to secure state ownership through parliamentary legislation, its publication by a group of avowedly socialist Rhondda miners provided dramatic evidence of the transformation among the South Wales miners since the late nineteenth century, when they had acquired something of a conservative reputation in terms of labour organisation and class consciousness. It represented a challenge to the authority of previously dominant miners' leaders such as 'Mabon' and the social philosophy they represented, based on staunch advocacy of co-operation with the private coal-owners, many of whom shared his Welsh nationality and identity, Liberal politics and a nonconformist religion that preached the harmony of classes.

The eclipse of Mabon's authority and set of industrial, social and political precepts on which it was based was the outcome of a complex process involving the waning influence of Liberalism and nonconformity on the Welsh miners and the dilution of a distinctly Welsh culture by large-scale immigration predicated widespread economic and social change in the coal industry and wider coalfield. The miners' leader, A.J. Cook, later reflected that the growth of aggressive industrial and political action of this period was representative of 'a profound mental conflict among the South Wales miners' and indicative of changing industrial-political associations and relationships which preceded 'the great intellectual revolution which took place among the miners'. He considered that it was in this period and climate of increased industrial antagonism and rising social and class identity and solidarity that 'the Liberal Party lost its grip upon the working people. It was not the war, neither was it the coalition activities of Mr Lloyd George that destroyed the Liberal Party. Liberalism was broken in Wales first of all by the miners'. There was a

³⁸ J.A. Thompson, 'The Historians and the Decline of the Liberal Party', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 22, 1, 1990, 66; also see Henry Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain*, London: Macmillan, 1968), 120; Shepherd and Laybourn, *Britain's First Labour Government*, 11-12, 16.

³⁹ Keith Laybourn and Jack Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour, 1890-1918* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 142-3.

sense in which defeated Liberal candidates and party observers recognised the nature and implications of this shift for the Liberal future in their post-election comments concerning 'feeble chapels', the miners' lack of interest in core Liberal campaigning themes warning of the threat of anti-constitutionalism and Bolshevism and the party's perceived lack of a viable contemporary industrial policy.⁴⁰ There was no question of Liberal naivety in the realisation that traditional themes and issues, in old and new guises, had lost their purchase on a shifting working class electorate, but the weakened party was ill-equipped to respond coherently. Even if its pre-war progress had been 'limited and varied', it was in this sense that the economic and social circumstances which faced Labour at the end of WW1 provided both political challenges and opportunities.⁴¹

The emergence of a radicalised industrial politics presented more challenges than opportunities for Liberalism, and attempts to respond to industrial developments and unrest were eroded by internal schism. In the absence of a responsive and forward-looking industrial strategy, there was also a strong sense in which the party (in its Asquithian guise particularly) continued to campaign on traditional themes of 'temperance, land legislation, administrative devolution and the terms of disendowment', which in the post-war industrial, economic and social environment of South Wales had largely been superseded by new priorities, tensions and conflicts. The increased appearance of unity and development of 'novel policies and new philosophy' in the so-called 'new Liberalism' of Lloyd George from about 1927 did little to halt the pattern of Welsh parliamentary representation, and any Liberal success in Wales continued to rest on ties of 'family influence, tradition and strength of the agricultural vote'.⁴²

In the context of the emerging solidarity of the mining vote in South Wales, election success still required good organisation and planning. In contrast to the various Liberal strands, Labour reinforced its growing political presence and campaign with careful preparation, solid administration and strategic campaigning. In Aberavon, Ramsay MacDonald devoted time to talk on non-political subjects at many of the local chapels, and the constituency was covered by a network of polling district committees each with its own secretary.⁴³ MacDonald, as Labour leader, was also extremely active outside his own constituency and spoke widely in support of Labour candidates in other local divisions. In Pontypridd, the Labour candidate held regular meetings for electors and, anticipating later common practice, used a team of supporters to campaign throughout the constituency.

⁴⁰ A.J. Cook, 'A.J. Cook Tells His Own Story', *Titbits*, April/May 1926, available at: <http://www.whatnextjournal.co.uk/Pages/history/Cook.htmlm> [accessed 8/11/11]; Alfred Mond to Lloyd George, 10 August 1922.

⁴¹ Duncan Tanner, 'The Pattern of Labour Politics, 1918-1939', in Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin, eds., *The Labour Party in Wales 1900-2000* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 113-16; J. Graham Jones, 'Wales and 'The New Liberalism', 1926-29', in J. Graham Jones, ed., *Lloyd George and Welsh Liberalism* (Ceredigion: National Library of Wales, 2010), 256-7; Shepherd and Laybourn, *Britain's First Labour Government*, 16.

⁴² See J. Graham Jones, 'Every vote for Llewelyn Williams is a vote against Lloyd George', in Graham Jones, *Lloyd George and Welsh Liberalism*, 238-9, 245-6; Graham Jones, 'Wales and 'The New Liberalism', 259-60, 262-3, 285; *South Wales Daily News*, 10 January 1921.

⁴³ *Western Mail*, 8 November 1922.

There was also evidence of Labour supporters in towns such as Brynmawr targeting and attempting to organise the 'women's vote'.⁴⁴ Fuelled by rising unemployment and the growing class solidarity of the miners and other organised workers, Labour's campaign suggested that its star was in the ascendant. As the results of the election became known, this trend was dramatically demonstrated as Labour won eighteen of the thirty-six seats in Wales, mainly in the South Wales coalfield, but with victories also in Caernarfonshire and Wrexham in the north where the quarrymen were turning to Labour's socialist case. In the face of Labour's onslaught and their own limitations, Liberal representation in Wales fell to just eleven seats. Lloyd George and his supporters had campaigned on behalf of a coalition and party unity that no longer existed, and the Asquithian Liberals could offer only a return to the largely sterile pre-war political world when causes of temperance, the Lords' veto and Welsh disestablishment were still live causes. As prior and subsequent political history has demonstrated, divided political parties find it notoriously difficult to convince the electorate of their fitness to govern, and it was clear that Liberals of both factions had lost their way engaged as they were in promoting spent causes and fighting old battles.

Labour had gained six seats from the Liberals in the coalfield – Aberavon, Aberdare, Llanelli, Merthyr, Neath and Swansea East – and the election marked the beginning of the Labour ascendancy in the area that was to characterise the political life of South Wales for the next seventy years, and the context and character of assorted victories tells us something of the change that had occurred and the nature and depth of this process. The successful Labour candidate for Merthyr was the chairman of the ILP and had been imprisoned during the war, while MacDonald was elected for Aberavon in a contest in which his personal campaign had aroused something akin to religious fervour among the miners of the Afan Valley. An official of the SWMF crushed the previously victorious C.B. Stanton, who had taken the constituency in 1918 as a pro-Coalition National Labour candidate, at Aberdare. In all, Wales returned eighteen Labour members, six Conservatives, all in the coastal arc between Barry and Newport, one Independent in Anglesey and eleven Liberals of various shades. Only one of these, the seat retained narrowly by Alfred Mond at Swansea West, could be described as an urban industrial constituency.⁴⁵ Even allowing for the idiosyncratic context of the earlier 'coupon' election, analysis of the swing to Labour in comparable contests in 1918 and 1922 illustrates the true nature of the party's advance. Merthyr, for instance, was won on a swing of 5.7 percent, Llanelli on a 6.2 per cent swing and, at Neath, the swing to Labour was as much as 24.3 per cent.⁴⁶ Every remaining Liberal seat was clearly at risk, and further Liberal defeats in local government elections indicated the fundamental challenge to the party's power base and offered further testimony to the political revolution taking shape in post-war Wales.

The General Election of December 1923

In May 1923, Bonar Law, the victorious Conservative Prime Minister, was forced to retire through ill-health and was succeeded by his Chancellor, Stanley Baldwin. Baldwin concluded that the only cure for the country's own ills, particularly that of unemployment,

⁴⁴ *Glamorgan Free Press*, 7 November 1922.

⁴⁵ Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 191-2; also see James Griffiths, *Pages from Memory* (London: Dent, 1969), 49-50.

⁴⁶ Cook, 'Wales and the General Election of 1923', 388.

was a protectionist economic policy. He therefore embarked on the process of seeking a mandate for the policy from the electorate, Parliament was dissolved and the country embarked on yet another general election called for December 1923. Baldwin's motives to call a general election may have been as much political as economic, primarily as a move against Lloyd George whose political stock was once again rising rapidly after a successful tour of the United States.⁴⁷ Baldwin also appeared wrongly to believe that Lloyd George was about to announce his own conversion to a protectionist programme, which could potentially jeopardise the unity of the Conservative Party. Baldwin's pre-election Plymouth speech of October 1923, announcing his support for protectionism as a means to combat unemployment, was an attempt to pre-empt the issue and isolate the Lloyd George and the potential threat of a revived Liberal Party attractive to any disillusioned Conservatives. Lloyd George had not undergone a Damascus-like conversion to tariffs. Through conviction or self-interest and in an attempt to rebuild his Liberal base, he remained a convinced if rational adherent of free trade, and on his return to Britain condemned any new tariff policy.⁴⁸

The net result of Baldwin's ill-conceived single-issue focus on protection in 1923 was that, in attempting to unite his own party, he effectively threw it into chaos, and at the same time re-united the divided strands of Liberalism around the banner of free trade. The defence of free trade was a cause that appealed to all Asquithian Liberals and their hesitations of a rapprochement with Lloyd George of the previous two years were disregarded. All Liberals would fight a united campaign without prefix or suffix, and a committee was established to resolve any rival candidatures. It was also determined that nothing in the style of the defining (but now seemingly redundant) 'Newcastle Programme' of 1891 could be attempted, but the Liberal campaign was unable to offer much in the way of an updated set of detailed and coherent radical proposals.⁴⁹ A joint manifesto was issued, offering the defence of free trade as the key issue, but reference was also made to new policies for unemployment and foreign affairs.⁵⁰

In spite of the poor performance in the election of November 1922 reflecting in part the decline of party structures in Wales, the Liberals had done little to reinvigorate their dwindling organisation. The same moribund structure of local associations, particularly in the coalfield areas, that had characterised Welsh Liberalism prior to 1922 persisted. After his heavy defeat in the Abertillery by-election in 1920, the Liberal candidate complained that, while every Liberal organisation in the constituency was moribund, every miner's lodge was fully equipped and poised for battle. Thereafter, no Liberal candidate was presented in the constituency until the 1929 general election.⁵¹ Faced with the loss of a further six industrial seats at the 1922 general election and the roots established by the Labour Party in the political culture of South Wales, it was paramount to recovery for the

⁴⁷ Keith Middlemas and John Barnes, *Baldwin: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 212.

⁴⁸ Campbell, *Lloyd George*, 72; also see Andrew Taylor, 'Stanley Baldwin, Heresthetics and the Realignment of British Politics', *British Journal of Political Science*, 35 (2005) 429-31.

⁴⁹ Chris Cook, 'A Stranger Death of Liberal England', in A.J. P. Taylor, ed., *Lloyd George: Twelve Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971), 299-300.

⁵⁰ *The Times*, 30 November 1923.

⁵¹ Morgan, 'Twilight of Welsh Liberalism', 390.

Liberals to organise their local resources more effectively. By mid-1923 the lack of Coalition Liberal activity at constituency level was most evident in the region in which the influence of Lloyd George might be expected to have been greatest, in Wales itself. In spite of the more coherent reorganisation and presentation of the brand nationally, on the eve of the 1923 election Liberalism in Wales remained disjointed and unprepared. At Merthyr, Liberal organisation was almost non-existent and, in mining constituencies such as Abertillery, neither Liberal nor Conservative associations had been active in the past year.⁵² In Bedwellty, nothing had been heard of the Liberals until the eleventh hour,⁵³ and in Ebbw Vale the Liberal candidate was conspicuous by his absence.⁵⁴ Despite signs of activity in Llanelli, there was still no Liberal candidate when the parliamentary dissolution was announced, in contrast to the Conservatives who, according to reports, were taking the division extremely seriously, and even Liberal attempts at a last ditch intervention in Ebbw Vale met with an indifferent response from the political organiser of the SWMF.⁵⁵

The Labour Party, in contrast, fresh from their success in 1922, was now the dominant political force in South Wales. The miners had long since reduced their reliance on direct industrial action as a political weapon, and were ready to turn to the Labour Party as their preferred means of industrial and political progress (although this process was perhaps not complete until the failure of the General Strike in 1926). In contrast to the limits of Liberal Party organisation in South Wales, Labour were adequately equipped and prepared for the forthcoming election. The party possessed the full backing and sponsorship of the increasingly powerful and influential SWMF,⁵⁶ and derived significant support from the influence held by its local branches or lodges in the social and political life of the community. Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour leader and representative for the mining constituency of Aberavon, had his progress described as something of that of a 'Messiah' while touring the industrial citadels of South Wales. In Newport, his car was towed nearly a mile through the streets as both he and the local Labour candidate were carried shoulder high, and the prevailing Conservative majority was reduced by over 3,000 votes to 324 in the ensuing election (which was to be overturned completely in 1929).⁵⁷

It was perhaps against this background that Liberal morale and organisation in South Wales was found wanting, but the surprise context of the 1923 election posed problems for all the political parties, catching some local associations and candidates unawares and unprepared. Hugh Dalton, future Chancellor of the Exchequer in Labour's first majority government in 1945, representing Labour in the Cardiff East constituency, found that his local party was disorganised and unprepared for the election, and serious financial constraints almost prevented the Labour candidate from contesting the seat in Swansea West. The Conservatives in South Wales experienced a slightly different set of issues caused by the party's forced and rapid conversion to economic protectionism. Lack of enthusiasm for the protectionist cause may explain the apparent paradox of the failure of

⁵² *South Wales News*, 14 November 1923.

⁵³ *Western Mail*, 19 November 1923.

⁵⁴ *South Wales News*, 9 November 1923.

⁵⁵ *South Wales News*, 14 November 1923.

⁵⁶ RBA, South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF), Executive Committee Minutes, November 1923.

⁵⁷ *The Times*, 22 November 1923.

tariff reform candidates to appear in those industrial areas where unemployment was high. No Conservative candidates ran in the seats of Ebbw Vale, Neath, Pontypridd, Swansea East and Gower, and it was the first election for thirty-nine years in which no Conservative candidate ran in Pontypool.⁵⁸

According to one notable historian and biographer of the period, once Parliament was dissolved it was one of the strangest electoral campaigns in British history, and two quite separate struggles were superimposed on each other.⁵⁹ The first was a return to the historic struggle between the Conservative and Liberal parties over the issue of free trade, a struggle in which the Liberal and Labour parties could find some common ground, and the second was the struggle between those parties over which of them would inherit the 'progressive' mantle as the radical alternative to the Conservative Party, and in this conflict they had little in common.⁶⁰ Rather in South Wales in 1923, and despite their national differences over free trade, there were a number of examples of local association pacts between Liberals and Conservatives to attempt to present a united front and stem the rising influence of the Labour Party. In East Rhondda, the Conservative candidate was presented with a free run against Labour in exchange for the similarly straight fight the National Liberal candidate had received in 1922.⁶¹ In Rhondda West, it was reported that attempts had been made to unite both parties behind a 'Constitutionalist' candidate,⁶² and similar attempts at an electoral pact were pursued in the seat of the Labour leader at Aberavon. MacDonald had won the constituency in 1922 on a minority vote in a genuinely three-cornered contest in which Conservative and Liberal votes together would have deprived him of the seat, and in 1923 a Liberal candidate was presented only to withdraw again to allow the Conservatives a free run against Labour on the promise that the Liberals would receive Conservative support in the constituency at the next election.⁶³ In the event, MacDonald won comfortably and, according to contemporary reports, the local response to his campaign and eventual victory reflected 'no mere manifestation of party spirit, no ordinary expression of loyalty to a party leader...[but] that uprising of the soul of a movement, of which MacDonald spoke so eloquently'.⁶⁴

As noted, the Liberal campaign in South Wales in 1923 was muted. Even with the incentive of the defence of free trade, a number of Liberal Associations were so devoid of activity that they failed to field a candidate or withdrew in favour of the Conservatives.⁶⁵ In those constituencies in which a Liberal candidate was presented to the electorate, the

⁵⁸ Cook, 'Wales and the General Election of 1923', 390-1.

⁵⁹ David Marquand, *Ramsay Macdonald* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), p. 295; also see Richard Lyman, *The First Labour Government, 1924* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1957), 53-68.

⁶⁰ See Steven Fielding and Declan McHugh, 'The Progressive Dilemma and the social democratic perspective', in John Callaghan, Steven Fielding and Steve Ludlam, eds., *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour Politics and History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 141-3.

⁶¹ *Western Mail*, 19 November 1923.

⁶² *Glamorgan Free Press*, 23 November 1923.

⁶³ Cook, 'Wales and the General Election of 1923', 391.

⁶⁴ *New Leader*, 30 November, 1923.

⁶⁵ *Western Mail*, 24 November 1923.

campaign appeared to offer only a further dose of negative and well-rehearsed anti-Bolshevism or a call for 'a sane circumspect course' at variance with the perceived radicalism and progressive themes of the headier pre-war years.⁶⁶ Occasionally, there were brief sentimental evocations of the old causes or some limited engagement with the substantive issues of protection or the capital levy, but the Liberal campaign in Wales relied largely on a sterile anti-socialist message directed at attracting Conservative votes in a number of constituencies.⁶⁷ In the context of the substantial gains made by Labour since the end of the war, mainly from the Liberal Party and in the face of similarly negative electioneering and propaganda, the Liberal line of attack was meat and drink to its party machine. Labour candidates criticised their Liberal counterparts in turn for their almost exclusively negative approach, and compared them unfavourably even with the Conservatives who at least appeared to offer relatively clear and positive policy objectives. The Conservative campaign largely centred on the national policies hurriedly formulated by Baldwin, emphasising the view that Britain was ill-suited to a free trade policy and under such a system faced an 'Unfair Fight with the Foreigners'.⁶⁸

The outcome of the election was ambiguous in a number of senses, not least in the apparent dichotomy of the Liberal results between its national position and that in South Wales. On one level, it could reasonably be argued that the re-united old Liberal Party scored its last electoral 'success'. Although overshadowed by the fact that Labour remained the second largest party, it was the last election in which a third party achieved over 100 seats and more than 26 per cent of the vote, but in Wales, and in South Wales in particular, the Liberal results told a different story; here the Liberal revival was conspicuous by its absence. Cardiff East was regained from the Conservatives, the Liberals missed out on Pontypool by just 326 votes and Alfred Mond lost narrowly to Labour in Swansea West, but in nearly every coalfield seat Labour's dominance over the Liberals was overwhelming and Arthur Henderson's narrow victory in Cardiff South brought their total representation in Wales to twenty-one.⁶⁹ Again, the shift to Labour in these industrial seats was consistent and impressive. Aberavon witnessed a positive swing of 8.9 per cent, Bedwellty 4.6 per cent and Rhondda East 16.9 per cent, and districts in which Labour faced just the Liberals in 1922 and 1923 experienced the same persistent swing. For instance, there was a 4.9 per cent swing to Labour in Gower and a 6.5 per cent swing in Swansea East.⁷⁰

Although there were much smaller swings to Labour of less than 1 per cent in places such as Aberdare, the general pattern and message was clear. In an election in which a re-united and partly revitalised Liberal Party experienced a partial revival in the national context, in South Wales Labour had stolen a further march on them and consolidated their advances of the previous three of four years. The days of a particularist Welsh programme in which the Liberals led the way finally appeared to be over. Temporarily at least, Labour

⁶⁶ Cook, 'Wales and the General Election of 1923', 392, citing the election address of the Liberal candidate for Neath.

⁶⁷ *Western Mail*, 23 November.

⁶⁸ Cook, 'Wales and the General Election of 1923', 393.

⁶⁹ See F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918-1949* (Glasgow: Political Reference Publications, 1969), 533-70.

⁷⁰ Cook, 'Wales and the General Election of 1923', 393.

was even able to take the University of Wales seat, imbibed with the culture of Welsh Liberalism and the 'spirit of Tom Ellis', which suggested something of the profound shift of mood taking place in the character of Welsh society and politics.⁷¹ The wider significance of the 1923 election in Wales was to confirm the emerging dominance of the Labour Party, grounded in the industrial districts of the south. The Liberal revival, for what it was, had made little impact.

The General Election of October 1924

In October 1924, the short-lived first Labour government, which had been the beneficiary of the inconclusive verdict of the December 1923 general election and subsequent resignation of Baldwin, was itself forced from office. Although the Conservatives had remained the largest party, they had done so without achieving an overall majority, and the results were interpreted as a clear vote against Baldwin's tariff reform campaign. The Liberals in their role as influential third party were now prepared to co-operate with their former progressive rivals to oust the Conservative government. In late January 1924, Ramsay MacDonald accepted office for the first time as head of a minority Labour administration ready for its first taste and experience of office. Not without its successes in difficult circumstances over the next nine months, the government fell with the withdrawal of Liberal support and subsequent vote of no confidence over the former's alleged pro-Soviet stance. MacDonald resigned, Parliament was dissolved and a general election called for 29 October.⁷²

With the emergence of a litany of issues related to Labour's relationship with the Soviet Union, both real and imagined, the campaign was soon dominated by the single issue of the 'Bolshevik menace' providing a unique opportunity for the Conservative propaganda machine. A 'vote for the Socialists is a vote for the Communists' became a rallying call for many Conservative candidates.⁷³ Labour's own campaign centred on the figure of MacDonald himself and, while he received his usual laudatory reception in his Aberavon constituency,⁷⁴ the fall-out from the so-called 'Zinoviev Letter' had done Labour's cause no good. While MacDonald and other candidates in South Wales attempted to promote positive achievements of the Labour government such as reductions made to taxation,⁷⁵ headlines foregrounding the 'communist threat' continued to dominate the campaign.

It was no surprise that the Conservatives won easily in the context of the election. In a high turnout, they received nearly two million more votes than in 1923 and obtained a landslide of 419 seats. Surprisingly perhaps in the prevailing atmosphere of the campaign, Labour also increased its national vote and returned 151 members. Again, the real losers were the Liberals; their national poll slumped badly and their representation in Parliament

⁷¹ See Morgan, 'The New Liberalism and the Challenge of Labour', 177-8.

⁷² Lyman, *The First Labour Government*, 93, 164; Shepherd and Laybourn, *Britain's First Labour Government*, 4-6, 23.

⁷³ See *The Times*, 20 October 1924; 24 October 1924.

⁷⁴ *The Times*, 18 October 1924.

⁷⁵ *The Times*, 24 October 1924; *Western Mail*, 24 October 1924.

was reduced to a mere rump of forty MPs.⁷⁶ The national pattern was to some extent replicated in Wales, where Labour's was less successful than in the previous two years, and MacDonald himself saw his majority in Aberavon drop by over 1,000 votes. The main beneficiary was the Conservative Party, which increased its total to nine seats, including all three Cardiff seats and the former Liberal country seats of Brecon and Radnor, Pembrokeshire and Flintshire, its highest tally of seats in Wales since 1895. The Liberals managed some small successes, narrowly regaining Swansea West and the Wrexham and University of Wales seats surprisingly won by Labour in 1923,⁷⁷ but the results overall confirmed their terminal downward electoral spiral.

Contrary again to the national mood and in spite of the insidious nature of the campaign against Labour, the party's development and influence in the coalfield seats of South Wales appeared pervasive. From Pontypool in the east through to Llanelli in the west, with the exception only of the Liberals' narrow victory in Swansea West, the Labour Party had consolidated its advances of the previous two years. Labour had the comfort of seven unopposed returns, itself a reflection of the already ingrained level of the concentration of its support. Labour's majority at Aberdare was increased to well over 9,000 and to 6,500 at Merthyr in a straight fight with a Conservative candidate. Llanelli was comfortably retained against Liberal opposition and both Caerphilly and Gower were retained with increased majorities against Conservative candidates. In the face of this onslaught, the erosion and demise of Welsh Liberalism appeared complete. The waning influence of this political tradition activated in 1868, fatally wounded in the elections of 1922 and 1923, was confirmed in the 1924 general election. In each of these campaigns, the limited post-war appeal of the Liberal Party in South Wales depended largely on a negative and sterile anti-Bolshevism and, swimming against the inevitable tide, anti-socialism and anti-trade unionism message. With the election of 1924, the Liberals had largely been driven out of industrial South Wales by its new and dynamic progressive competitor, a transformation that was to prove permanent. A new generation of socialist ex-miners, educated through the Central Labour College, including Aneurin Bevan, Morgan Phillips and James Griffiths, were to offer new inspirational and relevant leadership just as the young Liberals of the Cymru Fydd movement had done a generation previously in the mid-1880s and early 1890s.⁷⁸ Traditional Liberalism retained greater support in Welsh-speaking rural areas such as Cardiganshire and Anglesey, but held fading appeal for the urban industrial electorate of South Wales. By 1924, with the exception of Swansea West (reversed in the 1929 general election), there were no Liberal seats in Monmouthshire or Glamorgan.

Conclusion

The 1929 general election witnessed renewed attempts by Lloyd George to revive the electoral and political fortunes of the Liberal Party and to set the ideological tone of the campaign with his comparatively radical efforts to combat the entrenched problem of unemployment. Lloyd George's lead was followed almost to the letter by the Liberal

⁷⁶ Kinnear, *The British Voter*, 46-7.

⁷⁷ Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results*, 556.

⁷⁸ Griffiths, *Pages from Memory*, 24-6.

campaign in Wales,⁷⁹ and it appeared that perhaps for the first time in a decade or more offered a positive and effective response to the challenge of Labour in the form of a 'new frontier' economic policy in contrast to the 'safety first' approach of the Conservative and Labour parties. This profound economic debate appeared not to stir the electorate into a new progressive Keynesian dawn and, in spite of the renewed vigour of Liberal policy and campaigning, the party did badly in terms of representation if not votes. In Wales, Lloyd George's visionary campaign had been even more in vain, and the main effect of the election was to confirm that the principality was now more solid Labour territory than ever before. Not only was the party content to consolidate its strength in the more homogeneous industrial valley seats, but had expanded its range to previously less favourable constituencies such as Carmarthen and Wrexham and the three Cardiff seats, where the new impact and organisational development of Labour was impressive.⁸⁰ The Liberal challenge had been rebuffed, and never again was there to be the prospect of a Liberal revival in Wales. Thereafter, it was to be only a steady retreat from the ten local seats achieved in 1929 until the general election of 1970 when only Montgomeryshire remained in Liberal hands. The Labour ascendancy appeared to be complete.

Even in the context of the adverse circumstances and party's abject national performance in the general election of 1931, Labour's support in South Wales remained firm. Even the urgency of the call for a 'doctor's mandate' for a National Government, including former colleagues, to continue to attempt to overcome the economic crisis failed to prevent Labour increasing the large majorities of many of its heartland seats in South Wales,⁸¹ reflecting the extent to which Labour in partnership with its industrial allies in the SWMF and through related bonds of industrial and class solidarity was now embedded in the political culture of 'the valleys'. Continued opposition to the National Government was encouraged among the many mining MPs by their industrial 'paymasters', and MacDonald's perceived 'betrayal' of his party and his class acted thereafter as a constant refrain of Labour mythology and historiography (and frequent warning to potential future Labour 'splitters').⁸²

With the resumption of traditional party politics and competition in the wake of the 1918 'coupon' election, Labour first established a significant foothold in industrial South Wales, consolidated this advance in the rash of elections from 1922 and demonstrated the new depth of its political appeal and support against the backdrop of the rehabilitated progressive challenge and adverse circumstances of the 1929 and 1931 elections respectively. The roots of this advance and rearguard response to the predicament of the 1931 general election, going back to the war years themselves and the analogous but as yet not wholly evident decline and fall of Welsh Liberalism, lie in the subsequent years of

⁷⁹ *Western Mail*, 20 May 1929.

⁸⁰ See Neil Evans, 'Cardiff's Labour Traditions', *Llafur*, 4, 2 (1985), 77-90.

⁸¹ TNA, Ramsay MacDonald Papers, PRO 30/69/388, 'Appeal to the Nation'.

⁸² RBA, SWMF Executive Committee Minute Book C2 1930-32, Council Meeting, 4 September 1931; Gwilym Richard Miscellaneous Letters and Papers 14/15, Letter from Gwilym Richard to Ramsay MacDonald, 14 November 1931; Jon Lawrence, 'Labour - the myths it has lived by', in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo, eds., *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 354-7.

relatively homogeneous industrial, social and political development and corresponding transfer of allegiance from one political creed to another. As the artificial circumstances and results of the first post-war election were played out, the real political transformation in the respective fortunes of the progressive combatants was sealed and articulated in the resumption of normal party political competition between 1922 and 1924. In the context of the parallel development of the decline of Welsh liberalism and the Labour ascendancy in South Wales, the Labour hegemony was such that, at the political level, the principal test of its long-term authority would potentially emerge from the sectarian far left rather than from established mainstream politics. The Communist Party had made some headway since its foundation in 1920 in areas such as the Rhondda where traditions of informal rank-and-file movements were strong, but ultimately its influence remained relatively localised and narrow and in the industrial and political maelstrom of 1920s and 1930s South Wales the electorate remained wedded to the familiar institutions of the wider working-class movement in the form of the SWMF, TUC and Labour Party. The Labour ascendancy throughout the great bulk of South Wales, established in the general elections of the early 1920s which helped to redefine (and realign) the boundaries of British politics,⁸³ continued relatively unhindered during the 'threadbare' and barren years of the 1930s through to the 1970s and beyond. This unmitigated superiority was repeated in the local government sphere with Labour dominating control of the local authorities of Glamorgan, Monmouthshire and eastern Carmarthenshire from the early 1920s, but it was in the world of the trade union, the lodge, the pithead or shop floor branch that the new representatives of Labour exerted almost instinctive control over local society and politics. What perhaps made a significant difference to the profundity and longevity of this relationship and alliance was, unlike the former Liberal elite, the newly entrenched Labour organisation and its representatives were located deep within the community from which they sprang and acquired a depth of loyalty which was difficult to easily displace.⁸⁴

⁸³ See Cook, *Age of Alignment*, 113; Taylor, 'Stanley Baldwin', 429.

⁸⁴ See Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 282; Gwyn Williams, *When Was Wales?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 250, 265.