

The Formation of the Welsh Liberal Party, 1966-67

Introduction

In this paper I will argue that Emylyn Hooson was left with little choice but to reform the Liberal Party of Wales.

This paper will first of all give a brief background to the Liberals in Wales, it will discuss the threat from Plaid Cymru and why the Liberal Party of Wales needed to be dissolved.

It will show that without reform, the Liberals would have been teetering on the edge of extinction and irrelevance.

The teething problems of the newly formed Welsh Liberal Party will be assessed.

Hooson's personal vision for the Liberals in Wales will also be looked at. This will include assessing Hooson's attitude towards working with other parties and his desire to give the Welsh Liberal Party a coherent, Welsh voice.

The paper is intended as a snapshot of the

Background

The roots of the modern Welsh Liberal Party can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. At this time, the Liberals in Wales were divided into two federations, one in the north and another in the south. These federations were mutually suspicious of each other, with the Southern Federation believing that the North wanted to impose a form of Welsh speaking nationalism on Wales, whilst the Northern Federation was suspicious of the influence of England and wanted a separate Welsh Liberal Party. In an attempt to contain the squabbling and to show a united front, especially when it came to delivering a coherent message for Liberalism in Wales, Lloyd George set up the Welsh National Liberal Council. Despite Lloyd George's best intentions, the Council was essentially an umbrella organisation with no power to impose itself on the federations. As such, the true power lay with the mutually hostile federations.

Due to competing priorities on Lloyd George's time, coupled with the general decline in Liberalism throughout the UK from the 1920's, this situation remained largely

unchallenged and unchanged. A major problem, from the 1930's until the 1960's, was that Wales was largely ignored by the parliamentary party, as all efforts were put into saving the Liberal Party from extinction, particularly post 1945. This was particularly ironic, as from 1945 to 1956, the leader of the Liberals was another Welshman, Clement Davies.

The early to mid 1960's were a time of change within the UK Liberal Party, especially in terms of by-election wins. This included the famous by-election victory in Orpington where the Liberal Eric Lubbock, converted a Conservative majority of 15,000 into a Liberal majority of 8,000.

Something similar had happened in Wales when, following the death of Clement Davies in 1962, Emlyn Hooson stood in the ensuing by-election and gained Davies's Montgomeryshire seat, increasing the Liberal majority from 42.1% to 51.3%.¹ At this point, there was one other Liberal MP in Wales, Roderic Bowen in Cardiganshire.

Hooson, a barrister by profession, was over two decades younger than Bowen. Although often criticised for spending too much time on his law practice, he soon recognised that the Liberal Party in Wales faced a number of challenges, most notably from Plaid Cymru and the need to reform the Liberal Party in Wales.

Reforming the Liberal Party of Wales

Emlyn Hooson had come to realise that the Liberal Party of Wales was neither speaking for the Welsh, nor offering an appealing message to Wales. To rectify this, Hooson had a vision for Liberalism in the UK, which was for the Liberal Party to be the alternative 'radical, non-socialist party in Britain,'² which he hoped, in the process, would bring about a Welsh Liberal revival.

Inspired by Lloyd George's famous economic plans of the late 1920's, Hooson had, in 1965, begun to address the Liberals Welsh credentials by co-authoring and publishing a report that looked at the failing economic situation in Mid-Wales and how it should be rectified.

¹ Rallings, Colin & Thrasher, Michael, *British Electoral Facts 1832-1999*, (Aldershot, 2000), p168.

² Deacon, Russell, *The Welsh Liberals: The History of the Liberal and Liberal Democratic Parties in Wales*, (Cardiff, 2014), p171.

The Heartland: a Plan for Mid-Wales, which called for a Rural Development Corporation; an overhaul of rural transport, including the building of better roads and rail links between north and south Wales; the expansion of Aberystwyth to 60,000 people within thirty years. Their last recommendation was based on the town being easily accessible from the north and south, whilst being far enough away from Birmingham to stop it being a satellite of that city.³

Hooson was well aware that the decline of the Liberal Party within Wales could not be reversed by just one report, a more drastic measure was needed, namely the abolition of the Liberal Party of Wales and the setting up of the Welsh Liberal Party.

The Liberals were in a perilous state come the March 1966 General Election. They had been reduced to just one MP, Hooson, having lost their Cardiganshire seat to Labour by just 523 votes.⁴ The Liberals had also stood in just 11 of the 36 seats in Wales. Nine of these seats were contested by Plaid Cymru, splitting the vote between the two parties. Whereas, the Liberals might previously have benefited from the unpopularity of the two larger political parties, Plaid was now perceived to be offering a more coherent or popular economic and social message and this was having a real impact on the Liberals' share of the vote.⁵ Providing further evidence of Plaid's growing appeal in the traditional Liberal heartlands and increasing the urgency for reform within the Liberal, was the July 1966 Carmarthen by-election win by Gwynfor Evans, the Plaid Cymru leader. Carmarthen had been a Liberal seat until 1957, when it changed hands to Labour in a by-election. This was won by the former Liberal MP Megan Lloyd-George.

Despite the growing evidence of the threat from Plaid, both of the federations were still mistrustful of each other and unable to agree a coherent policy for Liberalism in Wales. This was made worse by a large amount of infighting that would often find its way into the press.⁶ In addition, the federations would act as though they were autonomous organisations, often ignoring the wishes of Liberal Party HQ when it

³ This information has been gleaned from a draft copy, entitled *The Forgotten Land: A Plan for Mid-Wales by the Welsh Radical Group*. The proposals stated above made it into the finished report.

⁴ Deacon, Russell, *The Steady Tapping Breaks the Rock*, *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 22, (Spring 1999), p15.

⁵ Jones, J. Graham, *David Lloyd George and Welsh Liberalism*, (Aberystwyth, 2010), p500.

⁶ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 44, Letter from Rhys Gerran Lloyd to Hooson (Including two undated cuttings from the Western Mail), January 5th 1967.

came to issues such as choosing candidates for General Elections. In the south, there were a number of constituencies that had not seen a Liberal candidate since the 1930's and were completely barren of any Liberal organisations.⁷ The federations would also hold onto the affiliation fees that were supposed to be paid to the Liberal Party,⁸ hiding their true financial position from the leadership.

In addition, the Liberal Party within Wales had trouble recruiting and holding onto younger members. Put simply, there was nobody to replace the aging members of that populated the Liberal Party in Wales at this point. This led the Conservative MP for Flint to quip: "The trouble with you Liberals is, they're carting you off in coffins."⁹

In order to address these issues, Hooson chaired a working group of senior Welsh Liberals¹⁰ to look at the issues and how best to reform the Liberal Party of Wales. Hooson knew the direction in which he wanted to take the Welsh Liberals, namely the organisational model adopted by the Scottish Liberal Party. The Scottish model was that of a federated party; emphasising its affiliation to Scotland, whilst maintaining links with the wider Liberal Party.

The proposals of Hooson's working group were put to an Extraordinary meeting of the Executive of the Liberal Party in Wales, on 4 June 1966.¹¹ The proposals were:

- a) The name of the Party be changed to the Welsh Liberal Party
- b) A constitution similar to that of the Scottish Liberal Party be adopted
- c) The Welsh Liberal Party should become an independent Liberal Party and responsible for organised Liberalism in Wales.¹²
- d) The North and South Wales Federations should be abolished.

⁷ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter from Hooson to Pratap Chitnis, dated 24 October 1967.

⁸ Deacon, 2014, p169.

⁹ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Memorandum to All Members of the Executive, from Martin Thomas, 28 July 1966.

¹⁰ Deacon, 2014, p169. The working group included Rhys Gerran Lloyd, Cllr Lloyd Morris & Martin Thomas.

¹¹ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, letter from Elfyn Morris to John Gibbs, dated 21st June 1966. Just to note, Deacon states that the meeting was held on the 11 June.

¹² NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, letter from Elfyn Morris Jones to Gruffydd Evans (Chairman of the Liberal Party Executive), 26th July 1966.

These proposals were passed by the majority of delegates; with 37 voting for the decision, 14 against and 1 abstention. However, despite the majority vote, there were a few dissenting voices, particularly in the South. A leaked story made its way to the BBC and the *Western Mail*, intimating that the party had not been adequately briefed of the changes and that it was a plan by the North Wales Federation to impose radical changes on the rest of the Party.¹³

The proposals were put to the wider Liberal Party of Wales at the AGM on the 10th September 1966. The proposals were duly passed and the Welsh Liberal Party (WLP) was formed and the Liberal Party became a fully federated structure.

Changes & Teething Problems

Following the passing of the proposals, a steering committee was set up, chaired by the Pontypridd councillor, Mary Murphy.

Funding

The steering committee realised that the affiliation fees were a major problem and decided to abolish the £100 fee, (£1,688)¹⁴, per association. They replaced it with a fee of £30, (£506.60), for the first 200 members and an additional £10, (£168.87), for each councillor.¹⁵

Hooson recognised that the Welsh Liberal Party needed to be financially solvent in order to survive. He was well aware that the federations, committees and associations had a number of dormant bank accounts and he requested that any funds be transferred to the Welsh Liberal Party.¹⁶ Some of these accounts, such as those of the South Wales Federation,¹⁷ were surprisingly forthcoming. Others, such as the North Wales Federation, appeared to be rather creative with their accounts,

¹³ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, letter from Hooson to Major Parry Brown, 10 June 1966.

¹⁴ www.bankofengland.co.uk/education/Pages/resources/inflationtools/calculator/flash/default.aspx – Accessed 01/11/2014. All adjusted inflation figures, throughout this paper, have been obtained from this source.

¹⁵ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Minutes of the Steering Committee held at the Hotel Commodor, Llandrindod Wells, 2 October.

¹⁶ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter from Hooson to Elfyn Lloyd Morris, 14 October 1966.

¹⁷ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter to Mary Murphy from Hooson, November 22 1966.

awarding an honorarium of £35 (£591) to their treasurer and sending the remaining balance of £8.19.4d (£151.42) to the WLP.¹⁸ Some accounts would take years for the WLP to wrest control of them.

One of the main reasons that Hooson wanted to form the WLP was because of the example of the fundraising activities of the Scottish Liberal Party. He was impressed with the amounts of money that they were able to attract. For example, between 1965 and 1966, they had raised £6000, (£101,320.20).¹⁹ In the same period, the Liberal Party of Wales had a total income of £198.11.0d, (£3,352.85), and the party folded with just £123.1.6d,²⁰ (£2,078.33) left in their account. However, by the end of the 1966/1967 financial year, the WLP's finances were in a much better state, with a surplus of £886.7.9d, (£14,406.28). This was largely due to a substantial increase in donations to the Party.²¹

Organisation

A major problem emerged within the first year and that was the lack of definition for the roles of the various committee members. This was initially highlighted when Mary Murphy's duties as General Secretary, (a role she took on in January 1967), was brought into question and she was subjected to a whispering campaign by members of the steering committee. This centred on whether the General Secretary should have taken some holiday leave whilst a conference was being organised. Murphy felt that the organisation of the conference fell to the Conference Secretary, Leslie Jones.²² Both Jones and Murphy tendered their resignations, but only Jones would depart. Murphy stayed in her role until June 1968, passing the mantle to Emlyn Thomas.²³ The infighting was contained and, unlike under the previous banner, never made it into the press.

¹⁸ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Minutes of the final North Wales Liberal Federation meeting, held 5 November 1966.

¹⁹ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter from Arthur Burdon, Secretary and Chief Agent of the Scottish Liberal Party, undated but likely to have been received around mid-1966.

²⁰ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Memo from the Treasurer Major J. Parry Brown: Accounts of the Welsh Liberal Party of Wales for the period 31st July 1965 to 31st August 1966; 8 September 1966.

²¹ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Memo from the Treasurer Major J. Parry Brown: Accounts of the Welsh Liberal Party of Wales for the period 31st July 1965 to 31st August 1966; 8 September 1966

²² NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter from Mary Murphy to Martin Thomas, 12 July 1967.

²³ Deacon, 2014, p177.

The ill-defined roles of the committee and officers of the WLP, would come to a head in 1970 when Thomas left his role of General Secretary. He had been allowed almost unchecked autonomy within the role and had squandered nearly £7,000 (£94,485.63) in the previous year, bringing the WLP close to insolvency.²⁴

Plaid Cymru & Devolution

It was important to Hooson that the WLP reflected and spoke out on issues that affected Wales. The Liberal Party of Wales had met with criticism for advocating a Welsh Council in their 1964 and 1966 General Election manifesto, whilst calling for a Parliament for Scotland.²⁵ It is clear that in those constituencies where Plaid was deemed to be an immediate electoral threat, the Liberal Associations were acutely aware that the Party's manifesto commitment appeared to show that its devolution policy was weak, leaving it 'open to confusion and attack on this issue.'²⁶ However, on St David's day in 1967, Hooson presented a Bill to the House of Commons, requesting 'self-government for Wales.'²⁷ Although it failed to pass the second reading, it paved the way for a second Government of Wales Bill in the House of Lords, presented by the Liberal peer, Lord Ogmores. Although it too failed, these attempts showed that the WLP was showing its commitment to Welsh issues. As devolution had been a traditional Liberal policy, it demonstrated that the Liberals were trying to reclaim some of the lost ground that Plaid had gained. Interestingly, Hooson's Bill had been backed by the Plaid Cymru leader Gwynfor Evans.

Hooson, a great admirer of Lloyd George, would make tentative steps to realise his ambition for a centre left, non-socialist alternative to the Labour Party. Hooson's personal view was that the Labour Party was 'on the verge of breaking up and the Nationalist parties in Wales and Scotland are, respectively, the chief instruments of this.'²⁸

Although Hooson was publically opposed to Jo Grimond's advances towards the Labour Party during the 1960's, (the so-called Realignment of the Left), believing

²⁴ Deacon, 2014, p177

²⁵ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, letter to Hooson from Roger Taylor, 29 April 1966

²⁶ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, letter to Hooson from Roger Taylor, 29 April 1966

²⁷ Deacon, 2014, p171.

²⁸ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter from Hooson to Bob Morgan, 9 November 1967.

that the Liberal Party should retain its autonomy and not alienate their voters by aligning itself with the Labour Party, particularly in Wales, he was also against forming an alliance with Plaid Cymru. At least publically.

In November 1967, Geraint Jenkins, the Research Secretary for the Welsh Liberal Party, wrote to Hooson: "As you know, I have been closer to Plaid Cymru than most members of the WLP... I cannot agree that Plaid Cymru want complete separation from the rest of these islands. Hasn't the time come for us to seek some alliance with Plaid Cymru? After all we go three quarters of the way along the same path and I am certain that the future lies in the formation of a truly radical Welsh Party."²⁹

Hooson replied that he was "far from sanguine about our position, and I think a great deal of re-thinking needs to be done."³⁰ He also stated that Plaid do indeed "want a complete economic separation from the rest of these islands," but Hooson could still "...see great advantages in having a form of alliance with Plaid Cymru...Lest it be said that I was the difficult man in these matters, I did make tentative approach through Dewi Powell, with no response whatsoever. I also made a direct approach to Gwynfor Evans with a suggestion that we might put up a joint candidate and eventually form a kind of united front. This was flatly turned down, and the subject has not been raised by him since."³¹

Hooson added that: "Personally, I have nothing against the formation of a truly radical Welsh party say, entitled the Welsh Democratic Party. Furthermore, I have nothing against a radical alliance with say Plaid Cymru, fighting 18 seats, and the Liberals fighting 18 seats in Wales."³²

It is clear that, from this unpublished exchange of views, Hooson may have felt that the Welsh Liberals were in a precarious position. The in-fighting continued, although it was mostly concealed from public view and the Welsh Liberals failure to take advantage of the Labour Party's "low ebb of...popularity"³³ meant that he was having

²⁹ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter from Geraint Jenkins to Hooson, 16 November 1967.

³⁰ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter from Hooson to Geraint Jenkins, 22 November 1967.

³¹ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter from Hooson to Geraint Jenkins, 22 November 1967.

³² NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter from Geraint Jenkins to Hooson, 16 November 1967.

³³ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter from Geraint Jenkins to Hooson, 16 November 1967.

doubts about the effectiveness of the WLP. Furthermore, the recent success of Plaid Cymru, in gaining an MP, had shown that the real Welsh revival was with Plaid and not with the Liberals.

The fact that Hooson publicly dismissed any suggestion of an alliance, might have had something to do with the failure of Grimond's 'Realignment' policy to prompt a serious debate with Labour. Moreover, to have publicly sought such an alliance would have been seen as a major backtrack on his opposition to Grimond's plan, because it would alienate voters in Wales. By actively and publicly pursuing an alliance, the WLP could have been exposed to a charge of political bed hopping. This view was intimated in a letter to Laura Grimond, where he writes: "I am sure that any kind of deal with the Nats would be a great mistake. We would be accused of having sought an agreement with Labour, then having failed to obtain it, then sought an agreement with the Nationalists."³⁴

However, Hooson's tentative suggestion of an alliance to Gwynfor Evans, which would push forward his vision of a Liberal revival, Hooson was following in the footsteps of his Liberal hero Lloyd George, who famously worked with the Conservatives in order to push his own political agenda.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has shown that the Liberal Party of Wales was a failing model that was in urgent need of reform. The federations acted as though they were autonomous of the wider Liberal Party, guarding their money and publically fighting between themselves. They were mistrustful of each other and of change.

Hooson, however, understood that the Liberal Party of Wales had to be reformed if it was to face the challenge of Labour and, in particular, Plaid Cymru. The creation of the Welsh Liberal Party was Hooson's attempt to bring some order to a chaotic situation. He also realised that, following the defeat of Roderic Bowen and the neglect by the leadership, the Liberal Party of Wales was in a precarious position and would need a drastic change in events to save it. To Hooson, the WLP needed

³⁴ NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42, Letter from Hooson to Laura Grimond, 27 September 1967.

to show that that it was a Welsh centric party and not a stooge of the parliamentary Liberal Party.

Although there was some teething problems, the WLP was being shaped into a more modern political party by Hooson. The infighting was being kept behind closed doors and, initially, the WLP was becoming more financially secure.

Despite this, Hooson's vision of a centre left, non-socialist alternative to Labour could have taken the WLP into dangerous waters. If Plaid Cymru had accepted an alliance, or the founding of a new 'Welsh Democratic Party', there is a danger that the presence of the Liberal Party within Wales would have come to an end. The WLP could have been swallowed up by a nationalist revival that would have benefited the Plaid elements of the new party. It is fortunate for the Liberals that Gwynfor Evans rejected this offer.

Although this paper has offered a snapshot of what occurred in the aftermath of the WLP's founding, it has shown that the party was becoming a more cohesive whole. The true test of how far the Welsh Liberals had jettisoned its past, would come with the 1970 General Election.

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