The Resignation of Clement Davies as Liberal Party Leader, October 1956

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Edward Clement Davies was born on 19 February 1884 at Llanfyllin, Montgomeryshire, the youngest of the seven children of Moses Davies, an auctioneer, and Elizabeth Margaret Jones, his wife. He was educated at the local primary school, then won a highly-prized scholarship to Llanfyllin County School in 1897, proceeded to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he became senior foundation scholar, graduated with first class honours in both parts of the law tripos, and won a glittering array of prizes. He briefly earned his living as a law lecturer at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, in 1908-9, was called to the Bar by Lincoln's Inn, and then joined the North Wales circuit in 1909 and the Northern circuit in 1910. In the same year he migrated to London, soon establishing a successful and lucrative legal practice, displaying an amazingly rapid mastery of his briefs (an astonishing gift which remained with him throughout his life) and publishing respected works on agricultural law and the law of auctions which stood the test of time. In 1913, he married Jano Elizabeth Davies, a London headteacher.

In 1914 – at the outbreak of war – he was appointed adviser (within the office of the procurator-general) on enemy activities in neutral countries and on the high seas, and was later made responsible for trading with the enemy, a position within the Board of Trade. In 1918-19 he served as secretary to the President of the Probate, Divorce and Admiralty Division, and subsequently as secretary to the Master of the Rolls until 1923. He was one of the junior counsel to the Treasury, 1919-25, and took silk in 1926. He served as chairman of the Montgomeryshire quarter sessions from 1935 until his death in 1962.

From his early boyhood Clement Davies had been utterly fascinated by political life, and he was approached as a possible Liberal candidate for the Montgomery Boroughs constituency as early as 1910. He did not, however, consent to stand for Parliament until 1927, when he was chosen as the Liberal candidate for his native Montgomeryshire as the successor to David Davies, later the first Baron Davies of Llandinam. Clem Davies was deeply rooted in Montgomeryshire, and he made his constituency home at Plas Dyffryn, Meifod for the rest of his life. Seen initially as an avid radical and a stalwart supporter of David Lloyd George, Davies was returned to parliament in May 1929 by a majority of just over 2,000 votes. In August 1930, he accepted a

lucrative position as legal director to Lever Brothers (at the then massive annual salary of £10,000), a commitment which seemed to spell the end of his political career. But, at the eleventh hour, the company resolved to permit Davies to continue in parliament, and in the general election of October 1931 (after some complex, perhaps shady, political manoeuvres within Montgomeryshire) he was returned unopposed as one of the National Liberal followers of Sir John Simon, as again occurred in November 1935.

Prior to his re-nomination in 1935, some voluble rumbles of discontent were heard to reverberate throughout the county. As a backbencher, Clem Davies served as a tireless member of a number of committees, and in 1937-38 he chaired an influential governmental enquiry into the incidence of tuberculosis in Wales, probing the standards of public health care and housing in all the Welsh counties. He continued to press for the appointment of a Secretary of State for Wales. Yet throughout the long 1930s, Davies was the typical semi-detached backbench MP, devoting much of his time to his extensive business interests. At the outbreak of the Second World War he chaired an action committee known initially as the Vigilantes Group which pressed for a more effective conduct of the war effort, and he is rightly credited with persuading Lloyd George to speak in the House of Commons in May 1940 in favour of Neville Chamberlain's resignation. Lord Boothby, a first-hand observer of these events, was to describe Davies as 'one of the architects – some may judge the principal architect' of the coalition government led by Churchill. The new Prime Minister did not, however, reward Davies with any kind of ministerial position in the new government. In 1941, he resigned his position with Unilever, and in August 1942 he re-joined the mainstream Liberal Party and spoke extensively throughout Britain.

In the general election of July 1945, no more than twelve Liberal MPs were returned to parliament, very few of them truly national figures, while some had never even met each other previously. At a meeting on 2 August 1945, Clement Davies was elected almost by default as the new 'Chairman of the Liberal Parliamentary Party' in succession to Sir Archibald Sinclair who had been defeated, very unexpectedly, at the polls at Caithness and Sutherland – a cruel fate which had also befallen previous Liberal leaders like H. H. Asquith and Sir Herbert Samuel. It was noted in the press that Major Gwilym Lloyd George, re-elected in Pembrokeshire, had declined to allow his name to be considered 'for personal reasons'. The new Liberal Party chief whip was to be T. L. Horabin, the MP for North Cornwall and a new recruit, who succeeded Sir Percy Harris, yet another Liberal casualty at the recent polls.[1]

There were many reasons why Clement Davies was not readily accepted as party leader. He had been a Simonite Liberal during the 1930s, and had been something of a 'loose canon' as an independent Liberal from 1939 until 1942;

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[1] *The Times*, 31 July and 3 August 1945.

he was thus easily portrayed as politically inconstant and something of a political maverick. Moreover, he had supported the discredited Munich agreement back in 1938 and had voiced some idiosyncratic sentiments during the war years. His return to the mainstream Liberal Party fold had been fairly recent. During the later stages of the war and during the 1945 general election campaign, he had endorsed some notably left-wing policy initiatives such as the nationalization of the coal mines and the transport system, and the partial nationalization of agricultural land, and he had warmly embraced the advanced proposals of the Beveridge Report of 1943 to push forward the frontiers of the welfare state.[2]

The Liberals had long memories in relation to their new leader's political record. Moreover, Sinclair had been defeated by only the narrowest of margins at Caithness and Sutherland in July 1945 in a bizarre contest where just sixty-one votes had separated the three candidates. The Conservative victor there, Gandar Dower, had given a rash promise to his electors that, if successful, he fully intended to resign his seat as soon as the war with Japan was over, thus causing a by-election where they might elect their MP on the basis of domestic policy rather than on continued support for the government's war effort. At the annual assembly of the Liberal Party in September 1945, delegates passed a resolution conveying their gratitude to Sinclair for his inspiring leadership since 1935 and anticipating his early return to the House of Commons in a by-election caused by Dower's honouring his promise.[3] Dower never did, but there remained a deep-rooted assumption among the Liberal faithful that Sinclair would eventually return to lead them, either at a by-election or at the very latest at the next general election in 1949 or 1950. Consequently, there was an air of ephemeral impermanence surrounding Clem Davies's leadership which continued for several years. When he was first elected, it was emphasized that he was not to be the Party Leader (and not even their 'leader'), but simply their 'chairman', whose specified brief it was to 'hold the office for the session' only.[4] Subsequently, he was often referred to as 'Leader of the Parliamentary Party'.[5] Davies's position remained somewhat insecure. Even in November 1946 it was pointedly reported that he had been re-elected as 'chairman' 'for the present session',[6] and at the end of 1950 (after five and a half years in the position), he voiced his heartfelt exasperation to Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, Asquith's daughter, frustratingly referring to 'this so-called *leadership*'.[7]

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2 Election address of E. Clement Davies, June 1945.

3 *The Times*, 10 September 1945.

4 *Manchester Guardian*, 3 August 1945. See also Jorgen Scott Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party: a Study of Retrenchment and Revival* (London, 1965), pp. 41-42.

5 Liberal Party, *Coats off for the Future!* (London, 1946), p. 5.

6 *The Times*, 26 November 1946.

7 Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), Clement Davies Papers J3/45, Davies to Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, 15 November 1950 (copy). These papers were consulted and cited by kind permission of the late Mr Stanley Clement-Davies, London.

Tom Horabin predictably resigned the Liberal whip in 1946 and then went over to the Labour Party the following year. His successor as Liberal Party chief whip was Frank Byers, the newly-elected MP for North Dorset. Byers and Clem Davies, much alarmed at the 'widespread apathy and indifference to true Liberal principles amongst the rank and file' reported by an internal committee on party reconstruction in 1946, immediately went to great lengths to raise money for their party and rekindle the flagging enthusiasm of the Liberal faithful.[8] By the time of the party's annual assembly in June 1947, its chairman, Philip Fothergill, reported the existence of more than 500 active local Liberal associations, compared with only about 200 in the previous September:

> We believe that for the first time in many years we have a chance to compete on equal terms with the other parties. There is arising a new Liberal Party, formally rooted in the splendid traditions of the past, but with a sense of unity and self-confidence attracting a flood of new recruits and using novel methods of raising money and organizing opinion.[9]

Davies indeed battled valiantly to assert his leadership, to establish himself as a truly national leader alongside Churchill and Attlee, and to assist his party to emerge from the political doldrums.

During the years 1945 to 1948, the Liberals generally tended to support the enactments of the Attlee government, readily voting for the early nationalization programmes, the establishment of the National Health Service, and for Indian and Burman independence. Indeed, Davies enthusiastically depicted the introduction of social insurance and the NHS as the implementation of basic Liberal policies, asserting, 'It would be ignoble to hinder that work merely because it happens to be in the hands of other people to promote.'[10] It did indeed seem as if the Liberal Party was to some extent recovering and re-establishing itself as a major political party, a metamorphosis largely attributable to Clement Davies's tireless assiduity. He had resolved that his party should put up at least 500 candidates at the next general election: 'If we are an independent Party, we will have no truck with anybody, we will stand on our own feet. We will fight in 600 constituencies. Turn these words into action, or acknowledge defeat here and now.'[11]

But the relationship between the Liberals and the Labour government deteriorated rapidly from 1947 onwards. The catalyst for this change was the exceptionally severe winter of 1946-47 and the major economic crisis which

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8 *Coats off for the Future!*, p. 8.

9 *Liberal Magazine*, 55 (June 1947), 178.

10 *Liberal Magazine*, 54 (July 1946), 309.

11 *Liberal News*, 19 September 1947.

ensued. Davies was convinced that much of the blame could be attributed to the failure of Attlee's government to devise an overall strategy to balance the national economy. As he told a Liberal rally at the Royal Albert Hall in November 1947, 'Worst of all politically we are today in the hands of political bankrupts dodging from one subterfuge to another. [...] There is a complete lack of true statesmanship.'[12] The underlying disunity which wracked the ranks of the Parliamentary Liberal Party was soon laid bare in the wake of the economic crisis. On the third reading of the government's National Service Bill in May 1947, the lack of cohesion of the Liberal MPs was glaringly exposed as Davies and four others voted against the measure, and the remaining five supported it.[13] Further dissension ensued over the government's proposals to reform the House of Lords and, above all, over the measure to nationalize the iron and steel industries. Generally, throughout the years of Attlee's first administration, Clement Davies and the party chief whip, Frank Byers, whose aptitude for administration and organization soon became proverbial, conspicuously failed to achieve a united front within the ranks of the Parliamentary Liberal Party.

Not everyone approved of their valiant efforts. During the 1945 parliament there was at least some dissatisfaction within the Parliamentary Liberal Party with the abilities and personalities of both Clement Davies and Frank Byers, whose activities appeared unfailingly low-key. During 1948 an attempt was made to remove both from office, with the intention that Lady Megan Lloyd George, the very left-wing MP for Anglesey, would replace Davies in a dramatic coup. But, as ever, Davies resolved to hang on, and most of the tiny band of Liberal MPs were anxious not to rock the boat in the interests of public appearance. In the event, Davies appointed Lady Megan to be the deputy leader of the party in January 1949, primarily as a tactical ploy to make it far less likely that she would then 'cross the line' to join the Labour Party, an increasingly likely scenario at the time.[14] Indeed, Davies (supported constantly by Frank Byers) appears to have rather strengthened his position during these agonizingly difficult years for him and his party. While his re-election as 'party chairman' was reported publicly in 1946, there was no further such notice in the press until the immediate aftermath of the general election of February 1950, and then not until October 1951, again in the wake of a general election campaign.[15] Although Davies's position initially was at best shaky, and although there was a vocal minority unhappy with his perceived lack of leadership skills and organizational talents, it would seem that the Liberal Party had resorted to the expedient of electing its 'leader' for the lifetime of a parliament. Even this practice was apparently not followed

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[12] NLW, Clement Davies Papers K1/41 (draft speech notes, 17 November 1947).

[13] *Manchester Guardian*, 24 May 1947.

[14] Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party*, p. 43.

[15] *The Times*, 1 November 1951.

after the general election of May 1955, when there are no references to Davies's formal re-election as party leader. Towards the end of his life, Davies wrote, 'Ever since I remember, the election of a Leader of the Liberal Party after he has first been elected is a purely formal matter. Frankly I do not remember any question being raised after I was first elected in 1945.'[16] This trend was undoubtedly reinforced at this time by the small, still shrinking, number of Liberal MPs.

It was inevitable that the general election would be held at some point during 1950. In the event, Attlee called an election for February. Although the Liberal Party succeeded in mustering a total of 475 candidates, they failed to make very much impact during the general election campaign. They were rather unfairly treated by the broadcasting authorities, and by then the party contained but few 'big names'. The big names that still remained – Clement Davies, Lady Megan Lloyd George, Frank Byers and Sir Archibald Sinclair – were largely confined to their own constituencies during the short campaign, the first three genuinely alarmed at the real prospect of electoral defeat, Sinclair galvanized by the equally real hope of re-capturing the very marginal Caithness and Sutherland constituency. Lady Violet Bonham-Carter campaigned extensively in Scotland and the north of England, but much of the campaigning burden was valiantly borne by the Liberal peers, Lords Beveridge, Samuel and Milverton. Generally, the outcome of the polls for the Liberals was again disappointing. Although Clement Davies was himself re-elected comfortably in Montgomeryshire with a majority of 6,780 votes, the party polled only 2.6 million votes nationally, a mere 9.1 per cent of the total votes cast, and 319 of the 475 Liberal candidates forfeited their deposits. Only nine Liberal MPs were returned to Westminster. The results have been described as 'an unrelieved débâcle' for the Liberals who were now reduced to something of 'a music-hall joke'.[17] The most agonizing jolt to the party faithful was the shock defeat of Liberal chief whip Frank Byers in North Dorset by the tiny margin of 97 votes. Moreover, none of the Liberal leaders defeated in 1945 succeeded in their bids to return to the Commons; Sir Archibald Sinclair, Sir Percy Harris and Dingle Foot were all defeated, Sir Archibald by only 269 votes at Caithness and Sutherland.

Party headquarters, and Clem Davies personally, attempted stoically to put a brave face on the outcome which could only be described as disappointing by any standards. A relieved Clement Davies wrote rather self-effacingly to Sinclair, 'I am frankly surprised at my return and especially at the support that was ultimately forthcoming in Montgomeryshire.'[18] On the Saturday evening

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16 Clement Davies to J. S. Rasmussen, 30 May 1961, cited in Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party*, p. 44.

17 Chris Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party, 1900-1984* (London, 1984), pp. 132-33.

18 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J3/14, Davies to Sir Archibald Sinclair, 22 March 1950 (copy).

19 Cited in Alan Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma* (London, 1966), p. 55.

following the general election, the following statement was issued by Liberal Party headquarters:

> The Liberal Party carries on. Let there be no doubt about that. Backed by more than two and a half million people in all parts of the country, Liberals feel more than ever that in the end only Liberalism can solve the deadlock between the opposing Right and Left ideologies which the election has thrown into such startling relief. Now that the party machines have crushed the independent, protection of the rights of minorities rests in the hands of Liberal Members of Parliament, and Liberals everywhere will back them to a man.[19]

In similar vein, the strongly pro-Liberal *News Chronicle* declared that the performance of the Liberal Party in the recent election would 'remain as a memorable and enduring protest against the insufferable tyranny of the sleek, soulless party machines that seek to dominate the country', and proceeded to criticize 'the insolence of those who would deny to Liberals the right to run their own candidates and the right to vote for their own party'.[20] As the Labour administration had been returned with a wafer-thin overall majority of just six seats in the House of Commons, some blamed Liberal 'intervention' for the indecisive outcome and the narrow failure to return a Conservative government. The *Guardian* realistically speculated that it might well be 'a matter for deep discussion whether a thinly scattered vote of this kind can become the basis for a political party on national lines'.[21] Was the whole future of the Liberal Party now really at stake? Privately, even Clement Davies, the hapless victim of mounting health problems, confessed to Sinclair, 'The position is far and away more difficult than it has been since the '29 Parliament.'[22]

In the debate on the King's Speech in March, the Conservative leader Sir Winston Churchill asserted,

> I must guard myself carefully against any suggestion of uttering what are called blandishments to the nine representatives of the Liberal Party, most of whom we see in their places under the guidance so generously provided by the Principality of Wales.[23]

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20 Cited ibid., 55-56.

21 Cited ibid., 56.

22 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J3/14, Davies to Sir Archibald Sinclair, 22 March 1950 (copy).

23 *House of Commons Debates, 5th series*, Vol. 472, c. 141 (7 March 1950).

Indeed, against all the odds, the five Liberal MPs from Wales had held on. In response, Davies promised that his party fully intended to act responsibly. It was the duty of all MPs 'to take upon ourselves the responsibility put upon us', as there could be no question that the holding of a further general election within the next two or three months was 'unthinkable'.[24] Davies had already been reaffirmed as party leader, his position now much strengthened by Sinclair's failure, by the narrowest of margins, to re-capture Caithness and Sutherland. Byers's agonizing defeat in North Dorset meant that Jo Grimond, who had won the Orkney and Shetland constituency in 1950 after a near miss there in 1945, found himself catapulted dramatically into the vacant position of party chief whip immediately upon his arrival at Westminster. He had previously never met any of his eight new colleagues in the Commons.[25] Thrown in at the deep end, Grimond found himself obliged to cope with the constant disagreements between his fellow Liberal MPs, most notably Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris and Lady Megan Lloyd George, and with Clem Davies's fundamental lack of leadership skills. In a desperate, heroic bid to please his colleagues, Davies almost always went out of his way to satisfy as many of them as possible on a whole range of policy issues.

In the spring of 1950, Lady Megan Lloyd George and Emrys O. Roberts, supported by two left-wing Liberal MPs from the west country, Dingle Foot and Philip Hopkins, began a rearguard action against what they perceived to be Clement Davies's intention 'to veer towards the Tories'.[26] In response, at the beginning of May, the Liberal leader felt compelled to issue a public statement that he had 'no intention of compromising the independence of the Liberal Party',[27] a resolute standpoint which he reiterated in his speech to the annual meeting of the Liberal Party of Wales at the end of the month: 'The Liberal Party will not jeopardise its independence or restrict its freedom of action for any price, however great.'[28] He was obliged to make the same point in print: 'The Liberal leaders have no knowledge of Conservative intentions or of Conservative proposals and no negotiations are taking place.'[29] In the autumn, the small band of radical Liberal MPs, led by Lady Megan, staged a revolt within their party, threatening to join Labour immediately, and caused Davies seriously to consider standing down as party leader, but somehow the threatened rebellion blew over.

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[24] Ibid. c. 157.

[25] Michael McManus, *Jo Grimond: Towards the Sound of Gunfire* (Edinburgh, 2001), p. 82.

[26] David M. Roberts, 'The Strange Death of Liberal Wales', in John Osmond (ed.), *The National Question Again: Welsh Political Identity in the 1980s* (Llandysul, 1985), p. 83.

[27] *The Times*, 3 May 1950.

[28] *Liberal News*, 26 May 1950: 'The Liberal Party is not for sale'.

[29] Ibid.

When the next election came in the autumn of 1951, only 109 Liberal candidates were nominated. These polled just 722,679 votes (compared with 2,621,489 in February 1950), and six Liberal MPs were returned. This was widely viewed as the lowest point to date in the fortunes of the Liberal Party. There was, however, a general sense of optimism within the Parliamentary Liberal Party that these six were more cohesive politically (the three potentially rebellious left wingers Lady Megan Lloyd George [Anglesey], Emrys O. Roberts [Merioneth] and Edgar Granville [Eye in Suffolk] had all been defeated in the recent general election), and were thus capable of acting in greater unison in the Commons in the 1951 parliament. There was also an intuitive feeling within the party that it had hit rock-bottom by then and that things could only improve. In the immediate aftermath of the election, the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, fired what has been described as 'the deadliest shaft of all'.[30] On 27 October, he offered Clement Davies ministerial office, almost certainly the ministry of Education, possibly within the Conservative Cabinet. Davies was probably sorely tempted, but, having consulted the senior figures within the Liberal Party (Lady Violet Bonham-Carter alone urging him to accept), he felt obliged to turn down the Prime Minister's offer.[31] The beleaguered Liberal leader pledged his party to support the incoming Churchill administration, not because it was Conservative, but because it was 'charged with the heavy responsibility of guiding the nation through the rapids into more peaceful waters'.[32] The Liberal Party was very weak, and, after two electoral battles, close to bankruptcy. Yet, for some reason which he could not really explain, Clem Davies felt more encouraged about the future than he had been in either 1945 or 1950:

> Curiously, I am less depressed today than I was in 1945 or 1950. I cannot give a reason for this. It is just a state of mind and may be quite illogical. However, there it is.[33]

Eighteen months earlier he had dejectedly described the Parliamentary Liberal Party as simply 'a number of individuals who [...] come together only to express completely divergent views'.[34] Now at least there was greater cohesion, and they remained an independent party at Westminster.

The Liberal leader had stood firm, telling his party in his 1952 New Year message, 'There is work for all hands on the Liberal ship.' To the party

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30 Roy Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party, 1895-1970* (London, 1971), p. 265.

31 J. Graham Jones, 'Churchill, Clement Davies and the Ministry of Education', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 27 (Summer 2000), 6-14. See also idem., 'Clement Davies and Montgomeryshire politics, 1950-51', *Montgomeryshire Collections*, 88 (2000), 95-116.

32 *The Times*, 22 November 1951.

33 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J3/67, Davies to Gilbert Murray, 15 November 1951 (copy).

34 Ibid. J3/26, Davies to Murray, 26 May 1950 (copy).

assembly in May he insisted yet again, 'We refuse to be stamped out. In spite of all temptations we still prefer our own doctrine and we are determined to maintain our independence.'[35] There were some Liberals, most notably the former party chief whip Frank Byers, who pressed for the Liberals to become a radical, non-Socialist party on the left – as was to happen under Jo Grimond later on.[36] Clem Davies demurred. Outside the party generally, he was viewed as weak and indecisive, committed to woolly, dated thinking and emotional oratory. As Morgan Phillips, general secretary of the Labour Party, put it in June 1952,

> Of course he is extremely ineffective and few people take him seriously. [...] The internal position of the Liberal Party appears to be getting worse than ever. Megan Lloyd George and the staff of the Radical Action Group have been refraining from attending recent conferences and Council meetings, and the councils of the party appear to be dominated [...] by those people who wish to work in association with the Conservative Party.[36]

Within the Liberal Party Davies certainly had his admirers, those who readily endorsed the opinion of the party president who described their 'esteemed leader' to the 1953 assembly as 'the leader of a party, which after fighting three political Dunkirks, refuses to lie down'.[38] But press comment on the same occasion was much less favourable. Davies's speech to the assembly had included a detailed break-down of local government reform, but was conspicuously lacking in detail on other themes. The radical programme adopted by the party the previous year was not advanced into hard policy initiatives. The lead needed by the assembly was simply not forthcoming from Clem Davies.[39] Their difficulties were underlined by the party's poor performance in the local elections of the same year. In 1951 there had been 79 Liberal borough councillors; by 1953 this dropped back to 60. The outcome of the by-elections contested by the party was also discouraging. In the same year, the little known H. F. P. Harris was appointed as the party's general director, but took time to find his feet in his new role. But their optimism was increased by the realization that the party was attracting a significant number of young supporters, particularly within the universities and colleges. By the time of the October 1951 general election, the Oxford University Liberal Association had no fewer than 1,000 paid-up members (compared with some

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35 *The Times*, 2 January and 19 May 1952.

36 Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma*, p. 66.

37 National Museum of Labour History, Manchester, Labour Party Archives, Morgan Phillips to Mark Starr, 24 June 1952 (copy).

38 *Liberal News*, 22 May 1953.

39 *Manchester Guardian*, 9 April 1953.

800 Conservatives and just 400 Labour Party members).[40] At Cambridge, where there were also more than 1,000 Liberal Party members, and at other provincial universities too, the party's progress had been truly commendable.

Then, in December 1954, at a by-election at Inverness, the Liberal candidate John Bannerman polled thirty-six per cent of the votes cast.[41] True, the successful Liberal candidate was a former rugby international and a noted Gaelic singer, and the constituency was certainly far removed from the Westminster vortex of power, but a Conservative majority of over 10,000 votes in 1951 (when no Liberal candidate had even stood) had been slashed to just 1331, and the Labour candidate had been driven into third place. Shortly before polling day, Churchill had told the electors of Inverness that to vote Liberal at the by-election would be to shirk the real issues which lay before them. Clem Davies was roused to respond vigorously:

> No one has ever dared to tell the Scottish people that they are shirkers. It has been left to Sir Winston Churchill to tell them this. [...] Quite obviously he has decided that the people of Scotland and indeed anywhere else, shall have, at the most, the choice of voting either for a Socialist candidate or a Tory candidate. There shall be no other choice put before the people by order of Sir Winston Churchill! [...] Is this the new Tory democracy of 'Progressive' Tories? It looks to me as if the doctrine of fascism has entered the doors of 10 Downing Street.[42]

It was a well-deserved, crushing retort to the Tory leader which had inspired Liberals throughout the realm. Plans were well advanced to increase the number of Liberal candidates at the next general election (to between 120 and 200), and the party's aspirations generally seemed to be better received in the national press.[43] By this time, Davies had celebrated his silver jubilee as the Liberal MP for his native Montgomeryshire.[44]

There was clearly some vigour left in both the Liberal Party and in its leader, who had celebrated his seventieth birthday the previous February. The

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40 Parliamentary Archive, House of Lords, London, Lord Samuel Papers A/131 (25), Gilbert Murray to Samuel, 29 October 1951.

41 Alun Wyburn-Powell, 'The Inverness Turning Point', *Journal of Liberal History*, 53 (Winter 2006-07), 18-25.

42 Letter from Clement Davies to John Bannerman, re-printed in the *Manchester Guardian*, 15 December 1954, and also in the *Daily Express*, 15 December 1954.

43 See the report in the *Liberal News*, 14 May 1954; NLW, Clement Davies Papers, Davies to Leonard Behrens, 7 October 1954 (copy).

44 See the interview in the *Liberal News*, 28 May 1954, which includes personal reflections on his political career by the Liberal Party leader. See also the editorial column, 'Mr. Davies's 25 years as MP', in the *County Times*, 19 June 1954.

momentum of Inverness was perpetuated in the new year. In his 1955 New Year's message, Clement Davies referred to the Tory leader's 'cool effrontery' and stated that he himself was being 'wrapped round with the patch-work robe of the Tory leader'. It was soon announced that party membership had increased by a full fifty per cent.[45] Many changes were clearly afoot. Some of the old veterans were retiring from political life. Others were leaving the party, often to join Labour. Throughout 1954 there had been no real challenge to Clement Davies's position as leader of the Liberal Party, and he was indeed described by one parliamentary reporter as 'the ablest man in Parliament never to have held ministerial office'.[46] But the most inspiring, indeed stirring speech which Grimond (then generally known as Mr Joseph Grimond) delivered to delegates at their annual assembly at Llandudno the following April created a very favourable impression, and made it clear to all that a potential leader-in-waiting was at least waiting in the wings.[47] In Davies's enforced absence from the whole of the assembly through illness, Grimond was given a golden opportunity to project himself. He paid handsome tribute to Clem Davies who, in almost a whole decade as party leader, had 'refused all temptation to till the easy fields where [...] sweet things come to quick flower'. On the contrary, Davies's hard choice had been to prepare 'the rough ground from which we hope a new Liberalism will spring'. Democracy, he insisted, was 'not only a matter of counting the votes, but of influencing minds'. In a rousing peroration, Grimond pinpointed three themes: greater opportunity, the wider distribution of property and profits, and the real need for 'a new loyalty, a new conception of modern society'. He asserted that the new age which was dawning required new political leadership: 'I am not interested in causes which are perpetually lost. [...] I am not attracted by the wistful glamour of defeat.'[48] With five years' experience as party chief whip, he clearly wished to establish himself as a progressive, go-ahead politician, capable of capturing the future. He certainly succeeded. In the words of the *Manchester Guardian*:

> The Chief Whip had not hitherto revealed himself very clearly to the party, although he had spoken in a modest, rather diffident way in previous assemblies – a reluctant hero if ever there was one. On Saturday he spoke with such firmness, breadth of view and authority that delegates rose to him as to a man capable of leadership in the future. When Mr Grimond had finished speaking he was warmly applauded. Then the delegates

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45 *Manchester Guardian*, 31 December 1954; *News Chronicle*, 17 February 1955.

46 Cited in Davies's obituary in the *County Times*, 31 March 1962.

47 *Liberal News*, 9 April 1955. See also the prescient comments in D. E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1955* (London, 1956), p. 68.

48 Jo Grimond, speech to the Liberal Party assembly, the Pier Pavilion, Llandudno, 17 April 1955, cited in Peter Barberis, *Liberal Lion: Jo Grimond: a Political Life* (London, 2005), pp. 62-63.

> rose in their places and stood, clapping enthusiastically, for a minute or so. But the effect of the speech was more lasting than that. Delegates took away with them a new hope such as they have scarcely dared to expect since the war.[49]

Grimond was married to Laura, the daughter of Lady Violet Bonham-Carter and thus Asquith's granddaughter. Lady Violet was widely regarded as 'the formidable high priestess of Liberalism' whose previous personal aspirations in political life had by now been transferred to her son-in-law.[50]

The proceedings of the 1955 assembly, and Grimond's impassioned speech, were given added weight by the announcement of Churchill's retirement (in his eighty-first year) and the almost immediate decision of the new Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, on the penultimate day of the conference proceedings, that parliament was to be dissolved pending a general election on 26 May. Although all six Liberal MPs were returned in the general election, there were no Liberal gains, but no losses either. Grimond alone had comfortably defeated both Conservative and Labour opponents in the election and by a wide margin. The main sources of encouragement were strong Liberal performances in constituencies like Devon North, Cornwall North and Inverness East (all three constituencies were now capable of falling to the Liberals at a future general election), an enhanced (if short-lived) status for Clem Davies as leader of the party now for a full decade, and a much-improved central organization. Party morale was indeed better than it had been for some years as Liberals sensed that some revival was in the offing. Their position had at least been consolidated, and there was some evidence that the party was now beginning to attract a 'floating' or 'protest' vote in the country.

But Clem Davies had been ill during much of the election campaign and had been unable even to launch it. Before the end of the year, veteran Labour leader Clement Attlee had also decided to retire from the leadership of his party. Clem Davies paid his colleague a tribute in gracious words which would have been equally applicable to himself:

> He was not ambitious. Events, a high sense of duty and a sterling character called him to fill, in succession, positions of increasing responsibility, which he so honourably and so successfully carried out. We remember his tenacity, his quiet steady courage night after night as he battled, from 1931 onwards, for the cause in which he so sincerely believed.[51]

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49 *Manchester Guardian*, 18 April 1955.

50 Anthony Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain Today* (London, 1963), p. 120.

51 *News Chronicle*, 9 December 1955.

Attlee was soon to be succeeded by Hugh Gaitskell, patently the representative of a much younger generation with more radical aspirations. Gaitskell was fully twenty-three years younger than the ageing Attlee. How much longer could the conspicuously ageing and ailing Clem Davies, now seventy-one years of age and, as was widely known, increasingly prone to frequent outbreaks of physical illness and psychological problems, also tending to become rather forgetful and anxious, remain at the helm of the Liberal Party? It was a question which many were now asking. Although personally popular and respected among the party rank and file, and widely regarded as sincere and wholly committed to the well-being of the Liberal Party, Davies certainly had his enemies from within the party too. People like Lady Violet Bonham-Carter and Philip Fothergill, a former party president and still influential as its vice-president, considered their leader to be 'intellectually flabby', while Laura Grimond described him as by this time 'faintly ridiculous'.[52] David Steel, who decades later was to be one of Clem Davies's successors as leader of the Liberal Party, looked back to the period of Davies's leadership: 'All the Liberal Party was was the left-over of a once great party. It didn't seem to have any relevance to modern political thought.'[53] From this point onwards there was mounting pressure on Clem Davies to make way for a younger leader, and no doubt now surrounded the identity of the heir-apparent. After the 1955 election, Davies told his five parliamentary colleagues that a new era was dawning in the life of their party – the age of youth. Consequently, its younger members now needed to accept more responsibility.[54] There was no explicit suggestion at this stage that his resignation was imminent, but it was clear to everyone that a new party leader was essential before the next general election was held in 1959 or 1960. Rumours of Davies's sharply declining health only fuelled the speculation.

Pressure was clearly mounting on the veteran Liberal leader at least to resign the leadership which he had now held for a full eleven years, possibly even to retire from parliament. Numerous columns in the national press hinted strongly that a change in the Liberal leadership was now desirable, perhaps essential, and a whispering campaign against Davies was initiated within the party. In particular, the Radical Reform Group, which was made up of younger, more progressive party activists, was insistent that Davies must be eased out of the party leadership as soon as was possible. There were those who portrayed the septuagenarian Liberal leader as ever more stubborn and self-obsessed. On all sides it was agreed that a worthy natural successor had already emerged in the person of Jo Grimond. Ironically, the pressure on Clem Davies to stand down had increased as the result of clear, if fragile, signs of

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52 Cited in Geoffrey Sell, '"A Sad Business": The Resignation of Clement Davies', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History*, 24 (Autumn 1999), 15.

53 *Marxism Today*, October 1986.

54 *Liberal News*, 1 October 1955.

Liberal recovery: several gains in the local elections in May 1956, and improved Liberal performances in a number of parliamentary by-elections – Torquay in December 1955, and Gainsborough and Hereford in February 1956. These signs of revivification only added weight to the argument that, with new blood at the top, the Liberals would be able to make still further progress. Moreover, a re-energized Liberal Party could only benefit from the general unpopularity of the Conservative Party following Suez.

The party's officers were much heartened by the course of events. In March 1956, Sir Geoffrey Acland, the chairman of the party's national executive, wrote to Sir Andrew McFadyean, then a party vice-president and former candidate, that the result of the 1955 election had surprised him even more than those of 1945 and 1950:

> Everything indicated to me that we could do nothing more than say we went down and deep down fighting. Although the need had always been there, now [I felt] for the first time for many years we may succeed.[55]

In the constituencies too, there were distinct signs of renewal and improved activity. During the same month, a report was delivered to the Blackpool Liberals at their Annual General Meeting:

> Membership was on the upgrade and the financial position healthier than for many years. Wards never better organized. Nationally the party is gaining ground especially among the younger folk.[56]

Similar encouraging reports were heard in other areas too. In May it was widely noted that illness had again prevented Davies from participating in the annual 'Welsh Day' debate in the House of Commons – although he had repeatedly expressed his determination to attend and speak.[57] Throughout the spring and summer of 1956 there appeared a succession of press reports that underlined the need for a much more vigorous leadership of the Liberal Party and hinted that a change in leadership was both highly desirable and indeed imminent. It was thought that the author of some of them may have been Frank Owen, a well-known journalist and the former Liberal MP for Hereford from 1929 until 1935 who had also stood there in 1955. In June and July, Major-General W. H. Grey, the party treasurer, and Philip Fothergill, alarmed at their party's performances in 1951 and 1955, came to the conclusion that the

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55 British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, Sir Andrew McFadyean Papers, Geoffrey Acland to McFadyean, 21 March 1956.

56 Lancashire Record Office, Preston, Liberal Federation Archives, minutes of the AGM of the Blackpool Liberal Party, 28 March 1956.

57 *The Times*, 15 May 1956.

conspicuously ailing Clement Davies had contributed all he could to the party and resolved that he should be encouraged to hand over to a younger man.

It was decided that Grey, who was noted for his blunt sense of directness and plain speaking, should personally buttonhole Davies to convince him of the necessity of his standing aside. In March 1958, Grey recalled his conviction in the summer of 1956:

> When I approached Mr. Clement Davies and suggested he should give way to a younger man, I was convinced that the Liberal Party's future depended upon the development of its organization in the Federations and constituencies, and I was sure only a younger man could give the drive necessary for the organization to be improved.[58]

The general feeling among the party elders was that it 'was time to go [...] the party will accept Jo'. It was widely felt that the highly respected Philip Fothergill was the driving force behind the campaign. Jeremy Thorpe, who had polled extremely well for the party in North Devon, was reported to be asking insistently, 'Can't we get rid of Clement Davies?' It soon became known that their leader had accepted no engagements for the period following the Folkestone party conference at the end of September and perhaps was preparing to stand aside after all.[59] But in discussions with other leading Liberals at the height of the 1956 summer recess, there was no indication that Davies was seriously considering calling it a day at all.

But the pressure on Clem Davies was clearly mounting. The Young Liberal movement threatened that, unless he announced his retirement at Folkestone, they would organize a demonstration against him at the assembly. But the six-strong Parliamentary Liberal Party alone had the right to choose a new leader and were reluctant to put pressure on their leader to act. In the new, potentially profitable situation of 1956, Clem Davies, although still well-liked personally, was seen as simply too old and too traditional to continue in office. By this point, the Liberals, with just six MPs (soon to be reduced to only five), appeared the largest of the minor parties rather than as the smallest of the major parties in the state. Yet, when the 900 delegates gathered at Folkestone on 27 September 1956 for their three-day annual assembly, all that was certain was that Clement Davies was due to address them as party leader for the fifth session on the morning of Saturday, 29 September.[60] 'Clement Davies: the big query' ran the headline in the *News Chronicle*: 'The big talking point is when he will retire. Those close to him believe the answer is "not yet", but delegates hope he will at least clear up the uncertainty about his intentions.'[61] There was

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58 NLW, Clement Davies Papers C1/107, W. H. Grey to Frank Byers, 10 March 1958 (copy).

59 Sell, '"A Sad Business"', p. 16.

60 *The Times*, 11 September 1956.

61 *News Chronicle*, 27 September 1956.

a general air of optimism among delegates at the assembly as a result of their party's performance in the general election of May 1955 and in parliamentary by-elections and local government elections in the meantime. As political journalist Ian Trethowan put it neatly, it was all 'a nice change after a quarter of a century of plunging into an ever deeper trough of political impotence'.

To Trethowan, this crucial period in its chequered history was the Liberal Party's 'last chance of surviving as an effective political force. The body-snatchers from Transport House and the Tory Central Office are hovering near. To argue, as some do, that the Liberals could still flourish as a middle-of-the-road Fabian Society is nonsense.' The party could not, he insisted, 'rely for survival on a Tory crutch'. He could sense that the Liberals were awaiting Clem Davies's departure 'with public reticence, but some private impatience. [...] Then, with 43-year-old Joe Grimond at their head, they will be ready for one more assault on the peaks of Westminster. If they fail, it will be the end. There is no plateau in politics.' Another Liberal daily carried a similar story under the headline, 'This is the Liberals' last chance.'[62] There was good reason for Trethowan's blunt words and for the Liberal delegates' general sense of optimism and well-being. On the second day of the conference, a national opinion poll revealed that support for their party had soared from 2.7 per cent at the general election of May 1955 to 9 per cent a year later and fully 10 per cent at the time of the October 1956 assembly. There was further reason for widespread jubilation in their ranks when it was announced on the second day of the conference that party membership had increased by some 10,000 since the 1955 general election.[63]

Speculation was fuelled by the news that Clement Davies had been offered a directorship in Cambrian Broadcasting Services, one of the companies which was avidly seeking the contract for the new independent television service covering south Wales and the west of England. He commented, 'I have reached no decision as yet, although I admit that the idea attracts me greatly. [...] Several friends of mine are connected with the venture.'[64] Yet, on the first day of the conference, nothing unusual occurred and Clem Davies's intentions remained shrouded in uncertainty. When party officials were pressed on the now urgent matter, they simply reiterated that the decision was one for the membership of the Parliamentary Liberal Party. In the admirably fair words of *The Times*:

> The rank and file of organized Liberalism, especially the younger generation, may talk about the need for reinvigorated

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62 Ian Trethowan, 'This is the Liberals last chance', *News Chronicle*, 27 September 1956; see also *The Times*, 28 September 1956.

63 *News Chronicle*, 28 September 1956; *Manchester Guardian*, 29 September 1956.

64 *News Chronicle*, 28 September 1956.

> Parliamentary leadership, but everybody seems loathe to be ungrateful to Mr. Davies. All in all, it looks as though somebody behind the scenes hopes to plant the idea of resignation into Mr. Davies's mind, so that he will choose to do with self-denying grace what nobody else would care to oblige him to do.[65]

On the second day of the conference, 'the tall, slim, slightly stooping figure of Mr Jo Grimond rose on the platform in a dazzling glare of floodlights'. Grimond had, as always, gone to immense trouble to prepare his conference speech, and delegates still recalled vividly his dazzling performance at Llandudno the previous year (when he had had to deputize for Clement Davies who had been unable even to put in a single appearance because of ill-health). Although he had, puzzlingly, chosen to speak on the dull subject of industrial development and the potential benefits of increased automation, his peroration was masterly. Even before Jo Grimond had begun to speak, there was 'a steady, prolonged thunder of applause'. The president of the Liberal Party, Leonard Behrens, announced that he would disregard the normal time limit on conference speeches: 'Mr Grimond, the floor is yours for as long as you would like to use it.' As Grimond spoke, one of the delegates eagerly hailed him as 'the hope of the Liberal Party', and the clapping developed into loud cheering which continued for several minutes, with the party leaders on the platform leading the way. The speaker himself responded, 'I thought for a moment I was expected to lead the singing in a verse of the National Anthem.' He had indeed received 'an ovation unprecedented in recent years. [...] Many of the delegates who took part in today's demonstration clearly believed they were greeting the new leader.' The *Manchester Guardian* agreed:

> Delegates to the Liberal Assembly made it unmistakeably clear to-day that Mr. Joseph Grimond was their candidate for the position of leader-elect of the Liberal Party. [...] He left the assembly as crown prince.[66]

The pressure on Clement Davies was clearly mounting. His detractors underlined the spontaneous reception accorded Jo Grimond. Asked for his opinion, Philip Fothergill responded blandly that Davies alone had to make the final decision, but emphasized that Clem Davies 'would be the last person to deny an opportunity to youth. Certainly by the time the next election comes we shall have a new leader.'[67] It would appear that the derogatory newspaper headlines and columns had been carefully orchestrated by senior party figures to pressure Davies into standing down as soon as possible. Davies arrived at

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65 *The Times*, 28 September 1956.

66 *News Chronicle*, 29 September 1956; *Manchester Guardian*, 29 September 1956.

67 *News Chronicle*, 29 September 1956.

Folkestone that Friday evening, ready for his major conference speech the following morning. He may have remained in a quandary about his intentions until the last minute, and his personal inclination was probably to hang on as party leader. He had told his constituency agent in Montgomeryshire that he had no intention of standing down at that point, and it would seem that, upon reflection at the last minute, he appended a hastily scribbled note to the typescript text of his long conference speech revealing his reluctant decision to stand down from the leadership of the party.

As Davies reached the Leas Cliff Hotel in Folkestone that fateful day in a rather emotional state, Leonard Behrens interrupted the busy conference proceedings to welcome 'a very dear, respected and beloved friend'. As their aged leader walked slowly down the main staircase to the conference hall, the delegates rose spontaneously to their feet and gave him a roaring reception, which he acknowledged with the words: 'Thank you for that very wonderful reception. And especially do I thank you this morning.' He spoke vigorously and emotionally for no less than 75 minutes, launching a virulent attack on the Conservative government for its handling of the situation in Cyprus. He had been, he went on, 'deeply shocked' to read that four British young men had just been killed there:

> How much longer are our young men to be called upon to sacrifice their lives? [...] Believing as we do that no man has the right to dominate over another man without that other's full, free, conscious consent, there is no doubt in our minds that the way to stop this is to grant to the people of Cyprus the self-government they demand.

Much of his long, sometimes rambling peroration was devoted to a declaration of his Liberal faith. As he approached the end of his speech, a faint trace of bitterness surfaced:

> Reading the papers recently, one had the view that some of our – what shall I call them – 'press lords' had only one anxiety, and that was not for peace in the world, or for Suez, or even for better circulation, but for the welfare and future of the Liberal Party. I would say to them, 'Criticism is right even if it were unfair; criticism is all to the good; but there is one thing I do hate, and that is hypocrisy.'

Then, with his voice positively cracking with the emotion and tears streaming down his face, he told the assembled delegates, anxious with anticipation, his dramatic news by way of a nautical metaphor which always came so easily to him in his speeches:

> It was time that the tiller was placed into the hands of a younger man, and a new voice should be calling upon the ship's company, rallying them to the great cause which we all have so much at heart. [...] Fortunately I can step down knowing that there is a worthy successor waiting, one who has fully earned his master's certificate. [...] I step down from the bridge and go below.

As he spoke, he was interrupted by impassioned cries of 'Oh, no' and 'Don't do it, Clem.' After he had finished, spontaneous cheering broke out in the hall, and the notes of 'For he's a jolly good fellow' began separately in the two back corners of the hall and then, as if miraculously, coalesced.[68] Appropriate tribute was paid to Davies by Frank Byers who then launched the financial appeal which he had arranged for the occasion. Delegates were encouraged to contribute generously 'as a tribute to Clem Davies', and a total of £5,003 17*s* 11*d* was collected quickly. On all sides, the sad course of events was depicted as an intensely moving occasion. Davies's reluctant standing aside had been painful to behold, and no-one could pretend that the transition of power to Jo Grimond had been especially well handled.

Such was the general theme of the editorial columns. The 'special correspondent' of *The Times*, present at Folkestone for the occasion, wrote at once, 'How maladroitly the king-making Liberals plucked the leader's mantle from a loved veteran, whose one fault is that he has grown old, and offered it to a lieutenant 30 years younger.' He proceeded to reflect on 'the harrowing scene that soured yesterday the ending of their Folkestone assembly'. The primary emotion manifest on the platform and indeed throughout the hall was 'remorse [...] not for what happened and perhaps had to happen, but for the way it was allowed to happen'. To venture the opinion that Davies had himself chosen the 'exact moment to announce his act of resignation' was 'idle pretence', for 'the king-makers, it now appears, had been quietly busy for some time' and had made cruel use of the Liberal press. 'So it was that what might have been becomingly arranged in private had to be played out hurtfully in the public eye.' After the applause and the singing had subsided, 'Mr. Davies had to stand there, trapped in limelight as though in a steel cage, imploring them to stop. He had had enough for one day.'[69]

The tone of the paper's editorial column on the same day was equally hard-hitting. To have held the Liberal Party together for more than a decade was indeed 'no light achievement. For eleven treacherous years he held the party together as an independent Parliamentary group and as an electoral force of consequence.' Although the number of Liberal MPs had halved from twelve

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[68] *Manchester Guardian*, 1 October 1956.

[69] *The Times*, 1 October 1956: 'Kite-flying at Folkestone'.

to just six during his leadership, and the party's popular vote in the country had plunged, 'No leader could have prevented this numerical decline: a less dedicated leader than Mr. Clement Davies might have failed to prevent it turning into a rout.'[70] These words have often been quoted by historians and writers subsequently. The *Manchester Guardian* made much the same point: 'For eleven difficult years he has led the small Liberal group in the Commons with constancy, courage and dignity. He has kept it, in spite of its lack of numbers, a force to be reckoned with.'[71] Many reflected on Clem Davies's readiness to abandon his highly lucrative legal career and extensive business interests in order to devote himself to political life, and there were several references to his decision to refuse Churchill's tempting offer of a cabinet position in October 1951:

> The personal sacrifice was considerable, but his action also preserved the integrity of the Liberal Party. [...] Liberals are therefore doubly indebted to this man who refused to bend the knee.[72]

There was no suggestion at this point that Davies would also stand down as the Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire. He explained within the constituency that he had been approached by Frank Owen to join the board of an ITV company, but that he had refused. He asserted that it was now his hope to devote more time to the affairs of the Parliamentary Association of World Government (of which he had served as president since 1951) and NATO.[73] In a sensitive assessment in the local press by Neville Penry Thomas (a former long-serving member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery) entitled 'His influence has been tremendous', the author rightly pointed out that Clem Davies's platform performances over the years had been 'variable. Sometimes he can move an audience. At other times his matter will lack freshness and its presentation will be totally uninspired. He cannot always command the Welsh "hwyl".' Thomas nevertheless paid tribute to Davies as 'a power behind the scenes' whose authority had manifested itself above all in the central role which he had played in bringing about the enforced resignation of Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister in May 1940 and his replacement by Winston Churchill:

> It is part of the paradoxical character of Clement Davies to have been possessed of diffidence and ambition. The former he still has; the latter he has gratified by doing more and being more than most people have ever known or suspected. Because of

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70 Ibid., 'Liberal leadership' (editorial column).
71 *Manchester Guardian*, 1 October 1956.
72 *News Chronicle*, 1 October 1956.
73 *County Times*, 6 October 1956.

> inner complexities in his make-up, he has never been a 'popular' figure in the Commons. [...] The certain fact about him is that he is a bigger man than he appears to be.[74]

Well-known journalist Edward James, London correspondent to the *Western Mail*, paid tribute to Davies's work in the House of Commons:

> He was the expositor of a case, and if he had a good case he never failed to make an impression on a House which admired his skill and fairness in argument and presentation.[75]

Predictably, Clement Davies soon found himself bombarded by more than two hundred letters and messages both from fellow Liberals and from admirers outside the party. One of the most interesting came from Jo Grimond who wrote rather contritely:

> I feel more than guilty about my absence from Folkestone, my departure for America and now the inadequacy of this letter. It must be brief because I am rushed off my feet. But thank you a thousand times for what you have done for us in the Liberal Party. I *deplore* the events (Press articles etc) which have led up to your decision. I do not believe it necessary for one moment that you should resign now. I read your speech with admiration and sorrow. In the interests of the party I wish we had had longer to prepare for it. [...] Why don't you stay on at least until January[?] – we should all be delighted.[76]

Philip Fothergill recalled Davies's Folkestone speech as '*the* saddest moment in my political experience', while Bob Boothby, who had always applauded Clem Davies's role in pressing for Neville Chamberlain's resignation as prime minister in May 1940, wrote, 'You have played a great part in our public life, some of it still unknown and unappreciated. And it is *by no means over*.'[77] Lord Samuel wrote from his London home:

> My dear Clem,
> This is a hard letter to write. For two days I have found it difficult to put pen to paper. You and I have worked together for so long, and in such complete harmony, that, although it is more than a year since I retired [from the position of the Liberal leader in the House of Lords], I have a sense of personal loss at

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74 Ibid.

75 *Western Mail*, 3 October 1956.

76 NLW, Clement Davies Papers J18/77, Jo Grimond to Davies, 'Sunday'.

77 Ibid. J18/69, Philip Fothergill to Davies, 1 October 1956; J18/36, Bob Boothby to Davies, 30 September 1956.

> your resignation. You have had a painful decision to make, as you did when you declined Government office in 1951; but there is no doubt that your decision is right now, as it was then. During all those years we have never had a disagreement, either political or personal. You carry with you my affection and my gratitude, together with my heartfelt good wishes for whatever the future may have in store.[78]

Interestingly, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, who had certainly not been an admirer of Clement Davies at the time of his first election to the party leadership in August 1945 and had not always approved of his subsequent policy initiatives and lines of approach, again focussed on his decision to refuse Churchill's tempting offer of the cabinet position of the ministry of education back in October 1951:

> You may remember that when Winston wanted you & two Liberal Under-Secretaries to join him in 1951 I wanted you to go in. My reasons were that the economic crisis was *far* greater than in 1931 – when Samuel, Archie [Sinclair] & Donald Maclean joined the national coalition (without any consultation or 'by-your-leave' from the party!) & I thought that the Liberals shld. – through you – make their contribution, & in spite of their small numbers could wield real *power*. [...] I did not feel that a Coalition is holy if it is made up of 3 parties, & unholy if it only consists of two! Moreover I thought that responsibility & administrative experience wld. benefit our party which had had none since 1918. One must construct as well as criticize. Whatever you may have thought or felt you refused office then – a great personal sacrifice – because you felt that in so doing you were interpreting the people's will. Looking back I feel that you may well have been right. Your action – however disinterested & patriotic – might well have split the remnant we had left. (I must add that *only* Winston's leadership made me think it possible. I cld never have contemplated it under Eden! Winston was never a Tory – as the Tories know.) But whether right or wrong it was a great & selfless sacrifice – which few would have made – & one that will always be remembered – with reverence & admiration.

She went on to shower lavish praise on the departing leader's 'gift of patience':

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78 Ibid. J3/84, Lord Samuel to Clement Davies, 3 October 1956.

> I have often marvelled at it during the discussions at our Liberal Party Committee. I have never seen you fail in patience or courtesy – however exasperating your colleagues! Leadership is not 'all jam' & cheers – alas! I have watched my father over that thorny & difficult course. How he suffered from the endless discords between colleagues – which it always fell to him to resolve. There is no more wearing or ungrateful task.[79]

Earl Attlee, now an active member of the House of Lords, also wrote:

> So you are joining me in retirement from Party leadership. For eleven years you have carried out with great courage a thankless and frustrating task. The Liberal Party owe you an immense debt of gratitude for your unselfish work. It has always been such a pleasure to me to have enjoyed your friendship and I am indebted to you for much kindness. While you remain in the Commons we shall meet from time to time. After the next election who knows you may come to our somnolent assembly.[80]

One letter came from Davies's old associate A. J. Sylvester, Lloyd George's Principal Private Secretary from 1923 until his death in March 1945, who worked completely voluntarily, without any remuneration, at Liberal Party headquarters for a year in 1948-49, possibly in the (ultimately forlorn) hope of securing appointment to a paid position there. Sylvester wrote to Davies from his Chippenham home on 1 October 1956:

> We heard you on T.V., and saw you 'step down from the Bridge'. It was a difficult moment. *But for you there would have been no Parliamentary Liberal Party. It would long since have gone.* Rid of the burden of Leadership, you will now have time to devote yourself to whatever interests you most. I am proud to have been associated with you in your Leadership. May the years ahead be full of good health, happiness and contentment for you both.

Davies replied almost at once:

> Thank you very much for your kind letter. No! it was not a difficult decision to take. I had determined on it 2 years ago. It was only a question of choosing the time. I have chosen rightly. The party is united for the first time since 1914. It is in good

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79 Ibid. J3/83, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter to Davies, 2 October 1956, 'Personal'.

80 Ibid. J4/42, Clement Attlee ('the other Clem') to Davies, 30 September 1956.

> heart. The young men will have me along side to guide & advise – but the fight will be theirs & they will enjoy it.[81]

There was absolutely no doubt about the identity of Davies's successor as party leader in October 1956. Jo Grimond had been marked out as his heir-apparent for some time. Ever since his first election as an MP in 1950, he had proved himself to be an adept parliamentarian and had served as an effective party chief whip from the outset. On several occasions he had acted as Davies's deputy in the House. He was generally popular throughout the party, and had increased his majority in his constituency in the general elections of 1951 and 1955. Consequently, Orkney and Shetland had become a safe Liberal seat. There was no other real possibility given the difficult circumstances of 1956. Sir Rhys Hopkin Morris (Carmarthenshire) was sixty-eight years of age and had no leadership ambitions whatsoever. As his wife wrote privately after his death a little later, 'The fact that he did not attain the great heights was due to his lack of interest in the heights themselves. [...] He was not interested in office; all he cared for was the furtherance of Liberal beliefs.'[82] Moreover, he had recently accepted the position of deputy chairman of the Ways and Means Committee in the House of Commons, which meant effectively that he was deputy speaker and thus removed from party politics. Both Arthur Holt (Bolton West) and Donald Wade (Huddersfield West) owed their continued re-election only to local constituency pacts with the Conservatives and were therefore far too vulnerable to take on the position of party leader. That left only Roderic Bowen (Cardiganshire), veteran of the 1945 general election, but he was viewed as far too right-wing, and, as a 'two-hatter' (in his own words), devoted much more time to his legal career than to his political life. Although Bowen would have liked to lead the party, he stood no hope of election against Grimond. Subsequently, however, he still harboured something of a grudge against Jo Grimond until he stood down from the leadership in 1967.

After his resignation, Clem Davies's friends stated that he had been deeply hurt by the way he had been removed from office, rather against his will. It is to his immense credit that he accepted with good grace the necessity to stand aside in the new age which was dawning in the autumn of 1956. Although she had not always approved of his actions and strategy, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, upon hearing of Davies's apparently unexpected death some years later in March 1962, was now moved to write sensitively in her diary expressing sentiments which must have been endorsed by countless others:

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81 Ibid. J18/174, A. J. Sylvester to Clement Davies, 1 October 1956 (the italics are mine); NLW, A. J. Sylvester Papers, file C95, Davies to Sylvester, 3 October 1956.

82 Parliamentary Archive, House of Lords, London, Lord Samuel Papers A/155 (xiii), 749, Lady Hopkin Morris to Samuel, 3 August 1957.

> Poor old Clem – one cld not help feeling great affection for him & in one way he inspired respect. He gave up a big income at Levers to serve the Party & refused office in W[inston]'s 1951 Govt. when I thought (perhaps mistakenly?) that it wld have been right for us to go in. [...] He showed no rancour at his displacement from the leadership by Jo – tho' he must have minded it.[83]

There was some speculation in the autumn of 1956 that Clem Davies might also stand down soon as the Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire. This proved highly premature, for Davies fought and won the general election of October 1959. Now, however, his majority was sharply axed to 2794 votes, and the constituency began to appear marginal. Davies's reduced 1959 majority has been described by Grimond's biographer as being 'as fragile-looking as the man himself after years of declining health'.[84] Myths grew up in the camps of the local Conservatives and Labour Party that Davies himself carried a substantial personal vote which would be lost to any successor. In May 1960, Clem Davies announced to the county Liberal Association that he would retire from parliament at the next general election by which time he was likely to be more than eighty years of age. Emlyn Hooson was chosen as his successor and held the seat with a very substantial majority in a four-cornered by-election in May 1962 held shortly after Davies's death.

It has sometimes been claimed that Jo Grimond, upon becoming Liberal Party leader in October 1956, saved his party from extinction. But that task had already been accomplished partly by Clement Davies, and partly because the British Liberal Party possessed an organization and a membership, eccentric though it certainly was, which was determined not to surrender its existence as an independent political party. By the time Grimond took over, his party no longer lived in fear of its elimination as an independent party, but he breathed into it a new vitality. The retirement of Clement Davies as leader in the autumn of 1956 marked a distinct stage in the development of his party. He had served with distinction as the link between the old Liberalism of Lloyd George and Sir Herbert Samuel (still the Liberal leader in the House of Lords until 1955) and the modern centre-party Liberalism of Jo Grimond. Grimond took over at a time when his party was beginning to emerge from the doldrums, reflected in improved by-election results and better performances in local government elections.

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[83] Bodleian Library, Oxford, Violet Bonham-Carter Papers, diary entry for 24 March 1962. On the relationship between Lady Violet Bonham-Carter and Davies, see J. Graham Jones, 'Violet and Clem', *Journal of Liberal History* (forthcoming).

[84] McManus, *Jo Grimond*, p. 145.