

## Alfred Thomas and Wales in Parliament, 1885–1910

*Gerard Charmley*

Alfred Thomas (1840–1927) is a curiously neglected figure in the history of late nineteenth century Wales. This is in spite of the fact that he left voluminous personal papers (most of which are now housed in the Glamorgan Record Office), and was a regular correspondent of a number of prominent politicians. There are a number of reasons for this; firstly, his name is similar to that of David Alfred Thomas, latterly Lord Rhondda, a more significant figure given his personal conflicts with Lloyd George and organised labour. Indeed, two recent authors have confused the two men in writing about the period.<sup>1</sup> Alfred Thomas' long life has also contributed to this neglect; by the time Thomas died in 1927, the Golden Age of Welsh Liberalism was past, and the Nonconformity to which he devoted much of his life had begun its long decline. He never married, and so left no children to perpetuate his memory, as D. A. Thomas and Lloyd George did. Lastly, one cannot avoid the impression that Alfred Thomas, a life-long bachelor, an evangelical Baptist, teetotal, vegetarian,<sup>2</sup> given to writing hymn tunes in his spare time, has simply failed to excite the interest of modern historians.

Although Thomas may be regarded as less personally exciting than Lloyd George, his career tells us more about Welsh politics and Liberalism in the years between 1885 and 1910, being in many ways a more representative figure than 'the Welsh Wizard'. As such, a study of his career is long overdue. A social leader in his native Cardiff, his political career culminated in the chairmanship of the Welsh Parliamentary Liberal Party from 1898 to 1910. During this time, Alfred Thomas had not only to grapple with the divisions of the Liberal Party during its wilderness years after the 1895 Conservative landslide, but the years after the Liberal landslide of 1906; an equally challenging period for Welsh Liberalism.

Thomas belonged to the commercial elite of Cardiff. His father, Daniel Thomas, was a contractor and merchant, operating the lime kilns at Llandough.<sup>3</sup> Educated privately at the Weston School, Bath, Alfred passed up the chance to attend university in favour of a partnership in his father's business.<sup>4</sup> A devout Baptist, converted in the 1859 Revival,<sup>5</sup> Alfred Thomas was a member of Tabernacle Welsh Baptist Church, Cardiff,<sup>6</sup> and a regular worshipper at Castle Street Baptist

1 Gwynfor Evans, *Land of My Fathers* (Talybont, 1972), p. 415; Chris Wrigley, *Lloyd George* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 21–2.

2 *South Wales Daily News*, 16 September 1927.

3 N[ational] L[ibrary] of W[ales], P[ontypridd] P[apers]; biographical sketch of Alfred Thomas by B. D. Johns (Periander), 31 December 1910, p. 1; *Pontypridd Chronicle*, 4 December 1885.

4 *South Wales Daily News*, 16 February 1898.

5 G[lamorgan] R[ecord] O[ffice], P[ontypridd] P[apers], XXIX: speech fragment, circa 1904.

6 NLW/PP/117: B. D. Jones to Alfred Thomas, 31 December 1910.

Church after his election to parliament.<sup>7</sup>

Thomas served his political apprenticeship on Cardiff Town Council, to which he was elected in 1875, representing Roath.<sup>8</sup> As Mayor of Cardiff in 1882, he led the town's successful bid to be chosen as the home of the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire.<sup>9</sup> His successful mayoralty led to talk of Alfred Thomas entering parliament, and he was suggested as a possible candidate for Cardigan Boroughs.<sup>10</sup> In 1885, he was nominated as Liberal candidate for the newly-created East Glamorgan constituency, which he won with a handsome majority.<sup>11</sup>

The early speeches of the Member for East Glamorgan were concerned with fields in which Thomas possessed experience, such as higher education and Poor Law reform.<sup>12</sup> In common with most of the Welsh Liberal MPs, he supported Gladstone's plans for Irish Home Rule, albeit, it was rumoured, without enthusiasm.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Alfred Thomas' gentle, genial manner, led some to suspect him of being 'a kind of dilettante politician'.<sup>14</sup> Such impressions would, however, be belied by his advocacy of Welsh national aspirations in the early 1890s.

The Welsh party which Alfred Thomas joined in 1885 was one greatly enlarged and encouraged by advances in the general election of that year. It possessed a developed policy and a developing organization. The keystone of its programme was the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Wales, on the ground that it claimed the allegiance of only a minority of the worshipping population.<sup>15</sup> Between 1870 and 1886, the year in which it became the primary objective of Welsh Liberalism, support for Welsh disestablishment grew from 45 votes to 229.<sup>16</sup> To this were added such secondary, but still important, matters as reform of the system of land tenure in Wales, education reform,<sup>17</sup> and tighter regulation of the drink trade.<sup>18</sup> After the Liberal split over Irish Home Rule in 1886, a small but influential minority among the Welsh Liberals began to advocate a measure of

7 D. Hugh Matthews, *Castle Street Meeting House – A History* (Swansea, 1989), p. 28.

8 *South Wales Daily News*, 16 February 1898.

9 GRO/PP/X.aa.1, J. Jenkin Jones (Mayor of Carmarthen) to Alfred Thomas, 15 February 1882; X.aa.2, Sir E. J. Reed (MP for Cardiff Boroughs) to Alfred Thomas, 25 March 1892; Sir Thomas Hughes, *Great Welshmen of Modern Days* (Cardiff, 1931), p. 121; William Johnstone, *The Welsh at Home* (Cardiff, 1904), p. 112; J. Gwynn Williams, *The University Movement in Wales* (Cardiff, 1993), pp. 89–90.

10 *South Wales Daily News*, Wednesday 16 February 1898; T. M. Bassett, *The Welsh Baptists* (Swansea, 1977), p. 319.

11 Arnold J. James & John E. Thomas, *Wales at Westminster* (Llandysul, 1981), p. 86.

12 GRO/PP/V.3: notes of a speech to the Pontypridd Junior Liberal Association, 8 November 1889; *Western Mail*, 11 January 1886.

13 T. Marchant Williams, *The Welsh Members of Parliament 1894* (Cardiff, 1894), p. 59.

14 *South Wales Star*, 10 July 1891.

15 Henry Richard, *Letters on the Social and Political Condition of Wales* (London, 1868), p. 16.

16 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Freedom or Sacrilege?* (Penarth, 1965), pp. 10–13; P. M. H. Bell, *Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales* (London, 1869), p. 229.

17 *Wrexham Advertiser and North Wales News*, 15 October 1887.

18 GRO/PP/XI.a.26: J. Bryn Roberts to Alfred Thomas, 5 February 1892.

Home Rule for Wales. With the election of Thomas Ellis as MP for Merionethshire in 1886, after a campaign marked by an appeal for 'fair play for Wales', this group gained a strong advocate in parliament.<sup>19</sup> Outside parliament, young Welshmen in London formed a number of political societies, adopting the name *Cymru Fydd*, or Young Wales, an acknowledgement of Ellis' admiration for the Mazzini, the Italian liberal.<sup>20</sup> Although, at the age of forty-five, Alfred Thomas hardly counted as young Wales, he was in sympathy with their ideals. He and T. E. Ellis became friends soon after the latter's election to parliament.<sup>21</sup> With Irish Home Rule overshadowing the political agenda, the calls for Wales to follow suit raised questions of how this should be done, if it was done at all. There was certainly plenty of action. In 1890, Alfred Thomas caused a local sensation when he decided to raise the issue on the floor of the Commons.

The older Welsh Liberals were not idle. Following the 1885 election, Liberal Federations were established, one in north Wales, and one in the south, meeting from time to time in a Welsh National Council. At the same time, the Welsh Liberal members of parliament transformed their organization. From 1888, the Welsh Liberal MPs were officially 'the Welsh Parliamentary party', with a chairman and two whips.<sup>22</sup> The first chairman of the party was Stuart Rendel, an English industrialist who had represented Montgomeryshire since 1880. In spite of his nationality, Rendel had proved a doughty champion of the interests of Wales, although he felt that the needs of Wales were best served by seeking to maximize the representation of Welsh interests at Westminster, rather than self-government.<sup>23</sup>

In February 1890, Thomas put forward an amendment to the Address which called for the creation of a Department of State for Wales, modelled on the Scottish Office, established in 1885, and headed by a Secretary of State;<sup>24</sup> this was seconded by W. Pritchard Morgan, the independent-minded junior member for Merthyr Boroughs. The motion caused intense controversy, not least because Thomas had failed to warn his colleagues that it was coming. There appear to have been two reasons for this: one was that T. E. Ellis, who would have been the obvious man to consult on such a measure, was travelling abroad for his health;<sup>25</sup> the second was perhaps less worthy, namely that Arthur Williams, MP for South Glamorgan, would steal the idea.<sup>26</sup> But the moment the amendment made its appearance on the Order

19 NLW, John Herbert Lewis Papers, D7/34: notes for a lecture on T. E. Ellis for the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, 1922.

20 NLW, Rendel Papers, IX.37: Edward Davies to Stuart Rendel, 23 May 1887; 'The "Cymru Fydd" Society': *Cymru Fydd*, 1 (1888), 162–4. One of the first branches of the society was the 'Cynlas West London', named after T. E. Ellis's birthplace (p. 163).

21 GRO/PP/II.a.89: T. E. Ellis to Alfred Thomas, 11 May 1898.

22 *Birmingham Daily Post*, 9 October 1888; *Western Mail*, 9 October 1888.

23 Kenneth O. Morgan, 'The Member for Wales', *Modern Wales: Politics, Places and People* (Cardiff, 1995), p. 353; F. E. Hamer (ed.), *Personal Papers of Lord Rendel* (London, 1931), p. 313.

24 *Liverpool Mercury*, 7 February 1890.

25 *South Wales Daily News*, 22 February 1890.

26 William Johnstone, *The Welsh At Home* (Cardiff, 1904), p. 120.

Paper, Thomas was called to explain his actions before a meeting of the Welsh Liberal Members. In the face of strong criticism, Thomas refused to apologize for his action, or withdraw the amendment.<sup>27</sup> His action was applauded by the pro-Liberal *South Wales Daily News*, which suggested that Alfred Thomas' colleagues had been motivated by jealousy.<sup>28</sup>

Thomas proposed his amendment on 24 February 1890, arguing that England's policy of assimilating Wales had singularly failed.<sup>29</sup> However, an attempt to deal with the civil unrest caused by attempts to collect tithes for the support of the established Church from Nonconformists in north Wales was ruled out of order by the Speaker, because of the pending Tithes Bill. Seconding, Pritchard Morgan emphasized that reforms to the governance of Wales were sorely needed, darkly hinting that if the amendment were not passed, the Welsh people 'would have no alternative but to devise some other method by which their desires and aspirations might be realized', making oblique references to Ireland.<sup>30</sup> In spite of hopes that the amendment would be a catalyst for a wide-ranging discussion of Welsh grievances,<sup>31</sup> only two other Welsh members spoke. The Hon. George Kenyon, Conservative MP for Denbigh Boroughs, expressed doubts as to the extent of any demand for Welsh Home Rule, brushed aside the matter of the Welsh language, and accused the amendment of being motivated 'by a narrow provincialism'. His constituency neighbour, George Osborne Morgan, a Liberal, also spoke out against the measure, on the grounds that a Secretary of State for Wales would not necessarily bring the changes Thomas clearly desired. He pointed out that, under a Conservative government, the Secretary of State might be appointed '[...] to set the Church on its legs and to put down Dissent'. Thomas withdrew the amendment without a vote.<sup>32</sup>

Thomas' amendment, and its failure, raised a storm of comment which revealed much about contemporary views on the prospect of Welsh Home Rule. The *South Wales Daily News* praised Alfred Thomas' speech, while the *Western Mail* ridiculed the whole affair, thanking Thomas 'for demonstrating once and for all, the absurdity of the cry for Welsh Home Rule'.<sup>33</sup> In a private letter to a leading light of Cymru Fydd, Thomas Ellis had nothing but censure for the conduct of his colleagues:

The Alfred Thomas debate was a disgrace to the Welsh members. It is petty to persecute him for a technical mistake in publishing his amendment, or perhaps for not publishing his project sooner. Rendel

27 NLW, John Herbert Lewis Papers, C1: Minute Book of the Welsh Party, 1890–95; minutes of a meeting held 18 February 1890.

28 *South Wales Daily News*, 24 February 1890.

29 Alfred Thomas, *Welsh Affairs: A Speech by Mr. Alfred Thomas* (London, 1890), pp. 3–4.

30 *Western Mail*, 25 February 1890.

31 *South Wales Daily News*, 20 February 1890.

32 *Western Mail*, 25 February 1890.

33 *South Wales Daily News*, 25 February 1890; *Western Mail*, 26 February 1890.

advocated such a change at a Cymru Fydd meeting two or three years ago. It was an excellent opportunity to discuss the claims of Wales and to insist on a division. Its defeat would have done good to the whole position of Wales. I think I can guess what Alfred Thomas must have suffered in the lobbies.<sup>34</sup>

Alfred Thomas was not discouraged by the failure of his amendment to attract the support of his fellow Welsh members. With the encouragement of T. E. Ellis, he began to prepare a bill which would meet some of the criticisms of his amendment.<sup>35</sup> Thomas' bill represented the hopes of mainstream Welsh Liberalism and attracted support of T. E. Ellis, David Lloyd George and S. T. Evans, known Welsh nationalists, as well as J. Lloyd Morgan, William Davies, and T. P. Price, representatives of the moderate wing of the Welsh party.<sup>36</sup> T. E. Ellis assured Alfred Thomas that he could '[...] hear on all hands great praise of your Bill'.<sup>37</sup>

The National Institutions (Wales) Bill appeared in July 1891.<sup>38</sup> Introduced shortly after the failure of a motion in favour of a Welsh Grand Committee, to deal with purely Welsh bills,<sup>39</sup> the National Institutions Bill was, in the words of Michael D. Jones, Bala, 'a Home Administration Bill, and not a Home Rule Bill'.<sup>40</sup> It not only proposed to create the post of Minister for Wales, but added to this a national museum, a university, a Welsh education department and a 'National Council', comprising a mixture of elected and appointed members.<sup>41</sup>

As the bill would not be considered before the summer session, Thomas took the opportunity to consult more widely than he had done with his ill-fated amendment. In order to initiate a discussion on the bill, Thomas invited opinion-formers outside parliament, including educationalists, journalists and leading members of the county councils, to a conference at Llandrindod, in order to discuss the proposal.<sup>42</sup> Among those present were Dr. Herber Evans, 'The Welsh Spurgeon'; Michael D. Jones, Bala; Councillor Edward Thomas of Cardiff (Cochfarf); John Herbert Lewis, Chairman of the Flintshire County Council, and a future MP; W. Llewelyn Williams and the Revd Towyn Jones, also future MPs, and Beriah Evans, another prominent Welsh nationalist.<sup>43</sup> Current MPs, other than Alfred Thomas, however, were nowhere to be seen. Llewelyn Williams felt 'the general impression at the

34 NLW, Ellis Jones Ellis Griffith Papers, 357: T. E. Ellis to Ellis Griffith, 11 March 1890.

35 NLW, T.E Ellis Papers, 1982: Alfred Thomas to T. E. Ellis, 12 September 1890; NLW, Ellis Jones Ellis Griffith Papers, 364: T. E. Ellis to Ellis Griffith, 5 November 1890.

36 GRO/PP/XI.a.1: National Institutions (Wales) Bill; IV.i.16: W. Rees-Davies to Alfred Thomas, 21 January 1892.

37 GRO/PP/II.a.26: T. E. Ellis to Alfred Thomas, 7 August 1891.

38 *South Wales Star*, 24 July 1891.

39 *Western Mail*, 15 March 1892.

40 GRO/PP/XI.a.10: Michael D. Jones to Alfred Thomas, 15 October 1891.

41 Alfred Thomas, 'A Welsh Programme', *Welsh Review*, January 1892, pp. 230–3.

42 GRO/PP/XI.a.9: circular, 11 August 1891; IV.i.10: T. E. Ellis to Alfred Thomas, 16 October 1891; *Liverpool Mercury*, 27 August 1891.

43 *Western Mail*, 26 August 1891.

conference was that the Welsh members purposefully absented themselves'.<sup>44</sup> In spite of the absence of members of parliament, the Llandrindod conference was generally accounted a success. Moderate and 'advanced' nationalists were able to reach a consensus, passing a resolution in support of the bill, justifying the appeal for unity given by Herber Evans, although the latter's statement that 'The Bill would help them to bring on the Millennium' was, to say the least, hyperbole.<sup>45</sup> The conference appointed a committee to promote the bill, appointing secretaries, including Cardiff journalist William Johnstone and J. Towyn Jones.<sup>46</sup> It was agreed to hold a second meeting, at a time and place of Alfred Thomas' choosing.<sup>47</sup>

The second conference took place in Cardiff on 16 December 1891, and although many of the Welsh MPs 'were conspicuous only by their absence',<sup>48</sup> they were more in evidence than at Llandrindod. Cardiff MP Sir Edward Reed agreed to act as chairman of the public meeting which followed the conference,<sup>49</sup> while Pritchard Morgan and T. P. Price spoke in favour of the bill.<sup>50</sup> The star turn was T. D. Sullivan, an Irish Nationalist MP, who happened to be passing through Cardiff on his way to address a meeting at Swansea.<sup>51</sup> At the motion of Caernarfon-based journalist Beriah Evans, the meeting resolved that a deputation 'representative of Welsh opinion, be appointed to wait on the Government to urge the claims of the Bill'.<sup>52</sup> A date was suggested, and a letter sent to A. J. Balfour, Conservative leader in the House of Commons, requesting an interview.<sup>53</sup>

In order to smooth the deputation's path, Alfred Thomas wrote to each of the Welsh MPs in early January 1892, asking for their support. Initial signs were promising, Thomas informing Towyn Jones:

I have now including my own no less that eighteen names on the back of the Bill. One of the Welsh Members Mr. Arthur J. Williams made a violent attack upon me at the first meeting of the members and I was prevented replying to him on the score that there was some work to be done at once. Today there was another meeting and I was strongly advised to let him renew the fight which he took good care not to do.<sup>54</sup>

However, the replies received from the Welsh members proved less than encouraging. As Thomas later recalled, 'nearly every one of my colleagues – "with

44 *South Wales Star*, 4 September 1891.

45 *Western Mail*, 26 August 1891.

46 NLW, MS 6677C: Alfred Thomas to J. Towyn Jones, 8 October 1891.

47 GRO/PP/XI.a.20: written account of Llandrindod Conference, 25 August 1891.

48 *Western Mail*, 17 December 1891.

49 NLW, MS 6677C: Alfred Thomas to J. Towyn Jones, 10 December 1891.

50 *South Wales Star*, 18 December 1891.

51 *Western Mail*, 17 December 1891; *South Wales Star*, 18 December 1891.

52 GRO/PP/XI.a.31: circular, 26 February 1892; *Western Mail*, 17 December 1891.

53 GRO/PP/XI.a.34: copy letter to A. J. Balfour, 10 March 1892.

54 NLW, MS 6677C: Alfred Thomas to J. Towyn Jones, 12 January 1892.

one consent began to make excuses”’.<sup>55</sup> Only Thomas Lewis (Anglesey) responded positively.<sup>56</sup> Henry Hussey Vivian (Swansea District) refused to commit himself.<sup>57</sup> Abel Thomas, formerly in ‘full agreement with all the provisions’ of the bill,<sup>58</sup> now declared the moment ‘inopportune’,<sup>59</sup> while J. Lloyd Morgan asked to have his name removed from the bill, declaring ‘I really think this is not the right time to bring forward the question of Welsh Home Rule in the House of Commons’.<sup>60</sup> This should have warned Thomas of the likely fate of his measure; even more ominous was the response of one of the more influential Welsh MPs to his circular.

D. A. Thomas, senior MP for the Merthyr Boroughs, emerged as the strongest critic of the measure. In response to Thomas’ circular, he admitted that the bill ‘[...] contains several provisions that I in common with other Welsh MPs have long advocated’, but insisted that the measure would have to be submitted to the Welsh party for discussion before he would support it.<sup>61</sup> When Alfred Thomas made it quite clear that, as with his amendment to the address, he had no intention of doing this, D. A. Thomas moved the bill’s rejection,<sup>62</sup> an action Alfred Thomas attributed to personal motives, namely jealousy at not having thought of the measure himself. The MP for Merthyr replied that his opposition was based on flaws in the measure. He argued that the mere existence of a Secretary of State for Wales would not guarantee the redress of Welsh grievances, since such a minister ‘[...] would certainly be a Tory when the Tories are in power’.<sup>63</sup> Further, he objected to the proposed composition of the National Council, on the grounds that the industrial districts of Wales would be under-represented, raising fears that the bill would lead to the populous counties of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire being dictated to by the rest of Wales. A self-confessed believer in an independent Welsh party, D. A. Thomas was a coalowner with commercial interests in the port of Cardiff, and felt unable to support any measure which might have an adverse effect on the prosperity of south Wales.<sup>64</sup> There is little evidence that D. A. Thomas was moved by jealousy to oppose the bill; he was an advocate of an independent Welsh National Party in the House of Commons, rather than Welsh Home Rule.

By mid-March, Herbert Lewis was sufficiently alarmed to write to Alfred Thomas asking for comment on ‘serious rumours of objection in the Welsh Party with regard to the National Institutions Bill’.<sup>65</sup> The deputation to Balfour was postponed indefinitely.<sup>66</sup> Addressing a meeting of South Wales colliers, Alfred

55 NLW, MS 6677C: Alfred Thomas to J. Towyn Jones, 5 August 1912.

56 GRO/PP/XI.a.22: Thomas Lewis to Alfred Thomas, 14 January 1892.

57 GRO/PP/XI.a.21: Sir H. Hussey Vivian to Alfred Thomas, 13 January 1892.

58 GRO/PP/IV.i.12: Abel Thomas to Alfred Thomas, 8 December 1891.

59 GRO/PP/XI.a.24: Abel Thomas to Alfred Thomas, 14 January 1892.

60 GRO/PP/XI.a.23: J. Lloyd Morgan to Alfred Thomas, 14 January 1892.

61 GRO/PP/IV.1: D. A. Thomas to Alfred Thomas, 1 February 1892.

62 GRO/PP/XI.a.38: off-print from the *South Wales Liberal*, 23 April 1892.

63 *South Wales Daily News*, 30 March 1892.

64 Ibid.

65 GRO/PP/XI.a.35: John Herbert Lewis to Alfred Thomas, 16 March 1892.

66 NLW, MS 6677C: Alfred Thomas to J. Towyn Jones, 17 March 1892; GRO/PP/IX.a.36: undated circular.

Thomas announced defiantly that he would go on with the bill, '[...] even if he stood alone'.<sup>67</sup> The bill passed its second reading in the Commons, but went no further.

The episode demonstrated the range of problems besetting any attempt to turn the rhetoric of the more radical Welsh members into reality: personal jealousies helped prevent any united front being formed, whilst real differences between the industrial and agricultural areas prevented the formulation of a genuinely national agenda. Thus it was that, despite the Liberal victory in the 1892 general election, the National Institutions Bill was forgotten: the government concentrated on the more urgent subject of Irish Home Rule, whilst the Welsh members returned to the one thing which tended to unite them and draw the support of English Liberals – the disestablishment of the Church in Wales.<sup>68</sup> For his own part, Alfred Thomas found the amendment of the Poor Law a more absorbing issue.<sup>69</sup>

The result of the 1892 election certainly offered an opportunity for the Welsh MPs to make progress. William Ewart Gladstone, returning as prime minister for the last time, depended on the support of the Irish Home Rule members for a majority of about forty, but he also needed those of the Welsh. With the Conservatives reduced to only three seats in Wales, Welsh Liberal demands could expect a high priority; indeed, Welsh disestablishment had occupied second place after Irish Home Rule in the Liberal programme. The involvement of Stuart Rendel in Gladstone's initial cabinet building further encouraged hopes that the needs of Wales would be more fully addressed by the new government. Appointed to the government as second whip, T. E. Ellis disclaimed any personal ambition, informing Thomas: 'My only wish and hope is to serve Wales in my new sphere.'<sup>70</sup>

Gladstone's reluctance to introduce a Welsh disestablishment bill produced not only rumblings of discontent from Welsh members, but also more radical calls for an independent Welsh party.<sup>71</sup> Initially, Alfred Thomas was attracted by the idea, but Lloyd George, as he told his wife triumphantly, worked on him:

You know that D. A. Thomas had been forming a 'cave' with five or six other fellows about this Disestablishment question. Alfred with his usual impetuosity rushed into it without thinking quite blindly. When he saw me he repented his hurry & has been ever since trying to get out of it best way he can. Now I drafted a kind of 'compromise' resolution for him. This he has submitted to the David Thomasites & he has already got three of them besides himself to agree. So that D. A. is almost alone now & Alfred is in a great state of delight with

67 *Western Mail*, 21 March 1892.

68 F. E. Hamer, *Personal Papers*, pp. 305–6.

69 *The Standard*, 3 December 1892.

70 GRO/PP/II.a.40: T. E. Ellis to Alfred Thomas, 21 August 1892.

71 NLW, John Herbert Lewis Papers, C1: Minute Book of the Welsh Party, 1890–95; minutes of meeting 15 August 1893.



what he calls my resolution.<sup>72</sup>

Alfred Thomas' resolution rejected immediate secession, and proposed that the Welsh party would 'take an independent course' if the government did not give firm assurances of action.<sup>73</sup> Like the secessionist resolution, this was rejected. Instead, the Welsh members adopted a weaker resolution, merely stating that the Welsh members would 'reconsider' their position if a Disestablishment Bill were not introduced during the 1894 parliamentary session.<sup>74</sup> Once more, a want of unity among Welsh MPs meant that the government was effectively free to ignore their demands.

When, following the accession of Lord Rosebery to the premiership in February 1894, Welsh disestablishment was not allotted its expected place in the programme of the new administration, three Welsh MPs, D. A. Thomas, David Lloyd George and Frank Edwards (Radnorshire), resigned the Liberal whip. The majority of the Welsh party refused to follow them, in what the *South Wales Daily News* characterized as 'a most prudent and polite decision'.<sup>75</sup> In spite of rumours to the contrary,<sup>76</sup> Alfred Thomas did not join the rebels.<sup>77</sup> The most likely source of the rumour is Lloyd George, who had written to Alfred Thomas shortly after his decision to resign the whip, calling on him to: 'fall in at once & we'll carry the country from one end to the other'.<sup>78</sup> A further appeal, issued via C. Tawelfryn Thomas, minister of Groeswen Congregational Chapel, Caerphilly, in which Lloyd George observed that Alfred Thomas '[...] fully sympathizes with us',<sup>79</sup> also fell on deaf ears. The only accession to the revolt was J. Herbert Lewis, now MP for Flint Boroughs.<sup>80</sup>

Alfred Thomas's refusal to join the rebellion encouraged the rebels' more vociferous critics to attempt to make use of him. Major Evan Rowland Jones, MP for Carmarthen Boroughs and an associate of Alfred Thomas from the days of the National Institutions Bill, convinced the MP for East Glamorgan to propose a resolution at the 25 May meeting of the Welsh party, calling for Welsh MPs to support the Rosebery administration. He did not, however, allow Thomas to see the resolution, which spoke of 'condemning efforts to inspire distrust in the Govt'.<sup>81</sup> The day before the meeting of Welsh members, however, Major Jones rendered himself incapable of keeping Alfred Thomas away from Lloyd George – indeed,

72 NLW, MS 20411C, 361: David Lloyd George to Margaret Lloyd George, 31 August 1893.

73 NLW, John Herbert Lewis Papers, C1: Minute Book of the Welsh Party, 1890–95; minutes of meeting 1 September 1893.

74 NLW, John Herbert Lewis Papers, C1: Minute Book of the Welsh Party, 1890–95; minutes of meeting 15 August 1893; W. Llewelyn Williams, 'Political Life', in *D. A. Thomas*, ed. by Margaret Rhondda, p.64.

75 *South Wales Daily News*, 14 April 1894.

76 *Morning Post*, 16 April 1894; *Western Mail*, 18 April 1894.

77 *South Wales Daily News*, 19 April 1894.

78 GRO/PP/IV.a.78: David Lloyd George to Alfred Thomas, 'Sunday'.

79 NLW, MS 12895C, 25: David Lloyd George to C. Tawelfryn Thomas, 7 May 1894.

80 NLW, MS 20412C, 425: Lloyd George to Margaret Lloyd George, 3 May 1894.

81 NLW, Rendel Papers, 663: A. C. Humphreys-Owen to Stuart Rendel, 25 May 1894.

of doing very much at all. Lloyd George gleefully described the events in a letter to his wife:

Last night the other fellows – headed by Bryn [Roberts] & Sam [Evans] – met in odd corners to put their heads together & concoct thunder against us. They framed a resolution but were very secret about it – wouldn't allow us even to see it. Today Alfred showed me a letter from Herbert Roberts asking him to move it & the Major to second it. The Major was not there – for he got another spree last night!!! He was stupidly drunk about the House & Alfred had once more to take him home. So the general was wounded & hors de combat. Well I got hold of Alfred & persuaded him not to lend himself to the others as a catspaw. Alfred had not seen the resolution. Subsequently I saw him. He had a copy of it then & didn't like it. It was too extreme so he said & implied censure upon us. Well to the meeting we went – Alfred moved a very feeble resolution – blank dismay on the faces of Bryn & Sam. He had left out everything which looked like a censure upon us.<sup>82</sup>

Alfred Thomas did not even speak on the resolution. Neither did Cornelius Warmington, the barrister who represented West Monmouthshire, and had found himself unexpectedly called to second the resolution in Major Jones's unavoidable absence.<sup>83</sup> So attenuated was the motion that the *Western Mail* (correctly) speculated that it had been 'diluted before its delivery by some unknown hand'.<sup>84</sup> It did no more than express 'confidence in the determination of the Government to pass the Welsh Disestablishment Bill', while 'declaring it to be the duty of the Welsh Party, in the interests alike of Wales and of Welsh Disestablishment, to give them honourable and consistent support'.<sup>85</sup> It made no mention of the rebels at all,<sup>86</sup> much to the annoyance of those who had asked Thomas to propose the amendment. Reflecting on the events, Lloyd George observed:

The more I think of yesterday's affair the more delighted I am with its outcome. There was certainly a Providence in the Major's spree. It enabled me to get at Alfred. Bryn roundly accuses poor Alfred of being 'under my influence'. It is too delightful for anything.<sup>87</sup>

Lloyd George spent several days in early June at Bronwydd, Alfred Thomas's Cardiff home, enlisting his help in attempting to win the editor of the *South Wales Daily News* over to the cause of the revolt.<sup>88</sup> This met with moderate success, as did

82 NLW, MS 20413C, 440: David Lloyd George to Margaret Lloyd George, 25 May 1894.

83 *Western Mail*, 26 May 1894.

84 *Western Mail*, 26 May 1894.

85 *Morning Post*, 26 May 1894.

86 NLW, John Herbert Lewis Papers, C1: minutes of the Welsh Party meeting, 25 May 1894.

87 NLW, MS 20413C, 441: David Lloyd George to Margaret Lloyd George, 26 May 1894.

88 NLW, MS 20413C, 450: David Lloyd George to Margaret Lloyd George, 4 June 1894.

Lloyd George's speeches in Glamorgan.<sup>89</sup> Ultimately, the government's promise to make Welsh disestablishment the chief issue of the 1895 parliamentary session was enough to bring the rebels back into the Liberal fold, restoring at least the semblance of unity among the Welsh Liberal MPs.<sup>90</sup>

The tumult caused by the revolt of the four members allowed Lloyd George to achieve a greater prominence in the politics of the principality. By the end of 1894, the focus of Lloyd George's activities had moved from parliament to the constituencies, a re-formed and revitalized Cymru Fydd becoming the vehicle for his ambitions. His aim was the creation of a single Liberal organization for Wales, replacing the two existing Liberal federations. The North Wales Liberal Federation was captured towards the end of 1894, its executive voting to merge with Cymru Fydd.<sup>91</sup> The South Wales Federation, under the presidency of D. A. Thomas proved less accommodating. D. A. Thomas refused the offer of a position on the provisional executive of the new all-Wales Liberal Federation,<sup>92</sup> and the executive of the South Wales Liberal Federation elected to boycott the convention planned for April which was to have seen the inauguration of the merged Welsh National Federation.<sup>93</sup> Alfred Thomas, a member of the executive, was almost certainly one of the three members of the executive who voted against the proposed boycott.<sup>94</sup>

He was the only south Wales MP present at the convention, held in Aberystwyth, although a number of others sent their apologies and warm words, an occurrence with which he was doubtless familiar.<sup>95</sup> In spite of the absence of official representatives of south Wales, the convention chairman, veteran Liberal Thomas Gee, declared that enough South Walians were there to make the convention representative, and pressed on with the creation of a single Welsh National Liberal Federation. Edward Thomas of Cardiff and Towyn Jones, fellow members with Alfred Thomas of the South Wales Liberal Federation executive, spoke for amalgamation.<sup>96</sup> Chosen as President of the Welsh National Federation (as the new body was called), Alfred Thomas chaired the evening meeting of the new federation, where he argued that the old Liberal federations had been rendered obsolete by the growth of Welsh national sentiment:

The great feature of the Young Wales movement is Nationalism, to which the older federations did not readily lend themselves and therefore became unsatisfactory and obsolete. This is not to be wondered at when we remember from whence they came, is not their birthplace Birmingham? Birmingham has long fallen from grace,

89 NLW, MS 20413C, 451: David Lloyd George to Margaret Lloyd George, 5 June 1894.

90 *Liverpool Mercury*, 6 June 1894.

91 NLW, John Herbert Lewis Papers, D7: minutes of the Executive of the North Wales Liberal Federation, 8 December, 1894.

92 NLW, D. A. Thomas Papers, A1/278: Beriah G. Evans to D. A. Thomas, 30 January 1895.

93 *Western Mail*, 13 April 1895.

94 *South Wales Daily News*, 19 April 1895.

95 *Western Mail*, 19 April 1895.

96 *Liverpool Mercury*, 19 April 1895.

and indeed it is quite in disgrace. But our movement is racy of the soil, it is Welsh in origin, form & spirit.<sup>97</sup>

Describing the federations as obsolete or ruling references to them as out of order was all very well, and in the heady atmosphere of the Aberystwyth conference, it was possible to believe that the goal had been reached. But on the morning after, the South Wales Liberal Federation was still there, and it had no intention of going away. Its president, D. A. Thomas, refused to be cowed, accusing Alfred Thomas of trying to mislead the public by claiming that the old Liberal federations originated outside Wales.<sup>98</sup>

A period of political warfare between the Welsh National Federation and the South Wales Liberal Federation ensued. A short-lived compromise was reached in June 1895, following the collapse of the Rosebery Government.<sup>99</sup> This would have transformed the Welsh National Federation into a co-ordinating body, the real power residing in four provincial federations.<sup>100</sup> Alfred Thomas and D. A. Thomas, presidents of the warring federations, issued a joint declaration, calling for Welsh Liberals to unite against the common Tory foe, as the Government resigned.<sup>101</sup> Following the election, which resulted in a landslide Conservative victory, the internecine quarrel among Welsh Liberals recommenced, reaching a peak of 'sound and fury' at Newport on 16 January 1896, when proposals to delete the provincial federations were defeated, and Lloyd George was howled down.<sup>102</sup> Alfred Thomas was not present at this meeting; as president of the rival body, he might well have been barred. He was, however, closely involved in the efforts to unite the Liberals of Wales which followed the collapse of the Cymru Fydd-inspired Welsh National Federation.

Alfred Thomas's involvement in the creation of the Welsh National Liberal Council was more by chance than design. The scheme had originated among a group of Welsh MPs which included Ellis, Lloyd George, and Albert Spicer, a London-born paper manufacturer who sat for Monmouth Boroughs.<sup>103</sup> The aim was to create a single national organization for Wales, albeit one less committed to the cause of Home Rule.<sup>104</sup> A national convention, representative of Welsh Liberalism, would be held to ratify their proposals.<sup>105</sup> D. A. Thomas sought to block the scheme at meetings of the Welsh MPs held to discuss it. Having failed, he resigned from the Welsh party.<sup>106</sup> Lloyd George gratefully recorded that Alfred Thomas had 'stood

97 GRO/PP/XXIX: Speech notes.

98 D. A. Thomas, 'The Aberystwyth Farce', *Cardiff Times*, 27 April 1895.

99 *South Wales Daily News*, 22 June 1895.

100 *Western Mail*, 24 June 1895.

101 NLW, D. A. Thomas Papers, A4/19: D. A. Thomas and Alfred Thomas, appeal to the Liberals of Wales, 24 June 1895.

102 *Western Mail*, 17 January 1896.

103 *Daily News*, 2 February 1897.

104 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 20 March 1896.

105 *Western Mail*, 26 May 1897.

106 NLW, MS 620418C, 797: David Lloyd George to Margaret Lloyd George 25 May 1897.

like a brick' for the scheme at these meetings.<sup>107</sup> Thomas's closer involvement was necessitated by the death of Sir George Osborne Morgan in August 1897, as the next most senior Welsh MP, Alfred Thomas was widely expected to succeed him.<sup>108</sup>

Following close liaison between Welsh whips David Brynmor Jones and Herbert Roberts, and Alfred Thomas,<sup>109</sup> the Welsh National Convention met in Cardiff on 4 February 1898.<sup>110</sup> Even D. A. Thomas's Merthyr Boroughs constituency sent delegates.<sup>111</sup> Although attempts to secure a senior cabinet minister, such as Asquith or Sir William Harcourt, were unsuccessful,<sup>112</sup> most of the Welsh MPs attended,<sup>113</sup> including T. E. Ellis, now Chief Liberal Whip.<sup>114</sup> The convention approved the creation of a Welsh National Liberal Council, and Alfred Thomas was able to announce the success of the scheme to a well-attended public meeting at the Park Hall that evening.<sup>115</sup>

Alfred Thomas's succession to the chairmanship was confirmed at a well-attended meeting of the Welsh members on 15 February 1898. Those spoken of as possible rivals declined to oppose him.<sup>116</sup> Among these was Lloyd George,<sup>117</sup> who explained to his brother that he had his sights set on 'bigger work', and preferred 'to try and force Alfred through'.<sup>118</sup> An attempt by Lloyd Morgan to abolish the post of chairman altogether was defeated.<sup>119</sup> Herbert Roberts and Brynmor Jones were to function as whips and secretaries to the party.<sup>120</sup> Charles Davies, Alfred Thomas's pastor, predicted great things of his leadership:

I look upon it was a very favourable omen that you have been called to this position at a time when the party had been welded into unity, and the memory of the grand meeting at the Cardiff convention will be an inspiration to you in your new and well deserved high position.<sup>121</sup>

Splendid though it would have been had this come to pass, as so often before the

107 NLW, MS 620418C, 783: David Lloyd George to Margaret Lloyd George 11 May 1897.

108 GRO/PP/IV.i.42: Vincent Evans to Alfred Thomas, 4 September 1897.

109 GRO/PP/IV.i.48: J. Herbert Roberts to Alfred Thomas, 4 January 1898; IV.i.52: D. Brynmor Jones to Alfred Thomas, 10 January 1898; IV.i.54: J. Herbert Roberts to Alfred Thomas, 24 January 1898.

110 *Daily News*, 2 February 1898.

111 GRO/PP/IV.i.51: D. Brynmor Jones to Alfred Thomas, 10 January 1898.

112 GRO/PP/IV.i.52: Sir William Harcourt to Alfred Thomas, 16 January 1898; IV.i.53: H. H. Asquith to Alfred Thomas, 24 January 1898.

113 *The Times*, 5 February 1898.

114 GRO/PP/IV.i.50: T. E. Ellis to Alfred Thomas, 6 January 1898.

115 *South Wales Daily News*, 5 February 1898.

116 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 15 February 1898.

117 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 February 1898.

118 NLW, William George Papers, 38: David Lloyd George to William George, 10 February 1898.

119 *The Standard*, 16 February 1898.

120 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 February 1898.

121 GRO/PP/III.d.2: Charles Davies to Alfred Thomas, 16 February 1898.

realities of Welsh politics blighted such high hopes.

Although they had been willing to support the formation of the National Council, that was almost the extent of the unity of the Welsh members. D. A. Thomas continued to make mischief for his namesake, objecting to a resolution in support of the principle of 'Home Rule all Round', put down in the name of the Welsh party by Herbert Roberts, on the grounds that it diminished the claim of Ireland to special treatment.<sup>122</sup> Ultimately, the measure did not come to a vote, being counted out at a late hour.<sup>123</sup> An attempt was made to introduce a bill embodying the recommendations of the majority report of the Royal Commission on Welsh Land, introduced by Herbert Lewis.<sup>124</sup> This would have included a scheme for land purchase, on similar lines to that operating in Ireland, and a land court to regulate the terms of tenancies.<sup>125</sup> The animosity of the Conservatives to this bill ensured its oblivion.<sup>126</sup> Given the size of the Conservative majority, the failure of such efforts was not surprising. It also meant the sidelining of disestablishment until the Liberals returned to office. A boost was given to the status of the Welsh party, however, when Alfred Thomas was chosen by T. E. Ellis formally to support the nomination of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman as leader of the Liberal Party in the Commons in early 1899.<sup>127</sup>

The death of Ellis from brain fever<sup>128</sup> on 5 April 1899 was not only a political but a personal blow to Alfred Thomas. For Rendel, writing to Alfred Thomas in connection with Ellis's memorial fund, this was the time to 'muse on the years that are past':

From very small beginnings, the Welsh Party, thanks to the inherent right and to many solid and some brilliant members, has grown into a most effective instrument, as well of the 'larger' patriotism as of that special domestic patriotism which is the essential foundation in the British Empire.<sup>129</sup>

Ellis's death also raised practical questions about the place of the Welsh party within Liberalism. Campbell-Bannerman asked Alfred Thomas to nominate one of the Welsh members to join the Whips' Office. In a response partially prompted by fears that the Liberal Party was planning to relegate Welsh disestablishment to a minor place in its programme,<sup>130</sup> Lloyd George indicated his desire to see the Welsh

122 *Freeman's Journal and Commercial Advertiser*, 12 March 1898.

123 Thomas Jones, *Lloyd George* (Oxford, 1951), p. 23.

124 *The Standard*, 29 March 1898.

125 D. Lleufer Thomas, *The Welsh Land Commission: A Digest of its Report* (London, 1896), p. 383.

126 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 April 1898.

127 GRO/PP/IV.i.57: T. E. Ellis to Alfred Thomas, 2 February 1899.

128 GRO/PP/II.a: D. Brynmor Jones to Alfred Thomas, 7 April 1899.

129 NLW/PP/33: Lord Rendel to Alfred Thomas, 11 May 1899.

130 *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 17 May 1899.

members become a separate, but allied grouping.<sup>131</sup> Alfred Thomas indicated his support for the nomination of Herbert Lewis as a junior whip.<sup>132</sup> Ultimately, the Welsh party failed to reach a decision on either question.<sup>133</sup> The Welsh MPs remained an integral part of the Parliamentary Liberal Party,<sup>134</sup> and the question of the vacancy in the Whips' Office was settled by the decision of the two MPs to whom the post was offered to decline it.<sup>135</sup> There were, it seemed, almost as many opinions on what the Welsh MPs should do as there were Welsh MPs. The National Council, largely composed of the voluntary party, did not possess the power to coerce the Welsh MPs, and eventually fell under the sway of Lloyd George.<sup>136</sup>

The death of Queen Victoria on 22 January 1901 and the succession of Edward VII provided Alfred Thomas with his next campaign for the recognition of Wales. With the Welsh party, he began a movement to have the arms of Wales incorporated in the Royal Standard.<sup>137</sup> He called together Welsh MPs and peers of both parties,<sup>138</sup> although some of his invitations, such as that extended to Lord Pembroke, showed a firmer grasp of the past than the present, given that Lord Pembroke was 'without any national interest in Wales, save the bones of some of my ancestors!!'<sup>139</sup> The effort did not meet with success, and, together with other actions by the Welsh MPs, prompted strong criticism of Thomas in some quarters. A. C. Humphreys-Owen, MP for Montgomeryshire, wrote to Rendel in despairing vein:

The Welsh Party does not exist. It committed suicide when it put that worthy old pantaloon Alfred Thomas into the chair. We made an ineffable blunder in not taking Lloyd George. We were cowards. We ought to have felt that if we made him our leader we should have been able to keep him in order but partly through honest mistrust of his judgement and partly through the jealousy of some of his competitors we refused him. The result is that the Welsh Party at the beginning of this Parliament met (thank heaven I was not there) and decided to let Brynmor put down a Land Law amendment in the address!<sup>140</sup>

As the year drew to a close, D. A. Thomas observed scornfully that the only substantial achievement of the Welsh party had been to have Caerphilly cheese placed on the menu of the Members' dining room, and 'even that great concession

131 *Morning Post*, 16 May 1899.

132 *Morning Post*, 19 May 1899.

133 *Wrexham Advertiser and North Wales News*, 27 May 1899.

134 *Liverpool Mercury*, 19 May 1899.

135 The paper reported that the north Wales MP, elsewhere identified as Herbert Lewis, declined the post on the grounds that he feared this would impair his freedom of action. The other, an unidentified south Wales MP, apparently had his chances spiked by 'a lady relative' (*Liverpool Mercury*, 1 June 1899).

136 Beriah Evans, *The Life Romance of Lloyd George* (Birmingham, 1916), pp. 72–3.

137 *The Times*, 19 February 1901.

138 GRO/PP/VIII.1: Lord Windsor to Alfred Thomas, 9 October 1901.

139 NLW/PP/61: Lord Pembroke to Alfred Thomas, 6 March 1901.

140 NLW, Rendel Papers, 689a: A. C. Humphreys-Owen to Stuart Rendel, 22 March 1901.

had been withdrawn after a week'.<sup>141</sup> Such words encouraged other Welsh MPs to bridle against attempts to restrict their freedom of action. Alfred Davies, the Hampstead merchant returned for Carmarthen Boroughs at the general election of 1900 threatened to join D. A. Thomas if Alfred Thomas disciplined him for speaking too forthrightly, and without the sanction of the Welsh party.<sup>142</sup>

Although the Welsh party was able to get the backing of the Hon. George Kenyon for a Welsh Local Government Bill in 1902, this was a reflection of the limited scope of the bill, rather than a Conservative embrace of Welsh Home Rule.<sup>143</sup> The scope for action by Alfred Thomas remained limited by the fissiparous nature of the Welsh party, as well as the shortcomings of his own leadership.

The failure of his attempt to get the arms of Wales incorporated into the Royal Standard neither prejudiced Alfred Thomas against the monarchy, nor the monarchy against Alfred Thomas. As chairman of the Welsh party, he was invited to attend the coronation<sup>144</sup> and was awarded a knighthood in the Coronation Honours,<sup>145</sup> an honour attributed by T. Artemus Jones to Thomas's position as chairman of the Welsh party. Writing in *Young Wales*, Jones outlined the qualities which made the new knight so suitable for his role:

He is, in the first place, of a modest and retiring disposition. I do not mean to suggest that modesty and retirement are characteristics conspicuous by their absence among the Welsh members. But the combination has produced those qualities which the average man sums up off-handedly as belonging to a 'nice man' – the sort of man to whom you are reluctant to say 'No'. The value of a character of this type in a body which numbers aggressive and strikingly able young men is really incalculable. He softens the asperities which result from heated and conflicting views on political issues; he smooths [sic] over in a quiet way personal differences which may arise on small points; and the tact he exercises in his personal dealing with his followers serves as a sort of bond of political unity.<sup>146</sup>

These words, of course, amounted to a description of what makes a good chairman; but are hardly the stuff from which leaders are made, nor the characteristics which enable a man to seize the opportunities politics throws out for quick and decisive action. Thus it was that when Nonconformist Wales protested against the Balfour Education Act of 1902, it was not Alfred Thomas but Lloyd George, the most talented orator among the Welsh MPs, who led the campaign, an action which brought the MP for Carnarvon Boroughs 'influence and fame' as the leader of

141 *Western Mail*, 25 November 1901.

142 *Western Mail*, 20 October 1901.

143 *The Times*, 27 January 1902.

144 GRO/PP: Invitation to Coronation, 17 May 1902.

145 *The Times*, 26 June 1902.

146 T. Artemus Jones, 'Sir Alfred Thomas, MP', *Young Wales*, 93 (September 1902), p. 211.



Nonconformity in parliament.<sup>147</sup> In common with other Welsh MPs, Alfred Thomas spoke against the bill, and attended protest meetings, in his own constituency and beyond.<sup>148</sup> But while it was Lloyd George who led the 'Welsh Revolt' campaign, in which county councils refused to fund denominational schools, it was Alfred Thomas who rendered this possible by amending the Education Bill to make the Welsh county councils the education authorities.<sup>149</sup> But it is not quiet and effective work of which the bards sing. Lloyd George reaped the benefits of the campaign, and in 1905, when the Liberal Party returned to power, he was given the 'bigger work' he had coveted, becoming President of the Board of Trade.

The advent of the Campbell-Bannerman administration brought with it rumours that it would not make a priority of the one issue which still united Welsh MPs, disestablishment. Sir Alfred warned that in that case it would find itself faced with 'a fighting brigade of Welsh MPs'.<sup>150</sup> In so doing, he brought down an avalanche of criticism on his head. The Bishop of Hereford described the threat as 'unnecessary', given the actions of past Liberal governments.<sup>151</sup> J. A. Spender, editor of the Liberal *Westminster Gazette*, warned against actions which might cause an incoming Liberal administration to find itself 'burdened with an impossibly arduous programme'.<sup>152</sup> D. A. Thomas derided Alfred Thomas's remarks, observing that Alfred Thomas had in the past shown an aversion 'to everything in the nature of independent action under all circumstances', speculating that his threat was little more than empty bluster.<sup>153</sup>

Bluster or no, the Liberal landslide of 1906 rendered Sir Alfred Thomas's threat meaningless. Although the Welsh party's ranks were further swollen by the capture of the remaining Conservative seats in Wales, the new Liberal government enjoyed a majority independent of the votes of Welsh and Irish members. In view of this, even if Alfred Thomas had intended to blackmail the government, it would have been impossible. However, with Lloyd George in the cabinet, Herbert Lewis a junior whip, and Reginald McKenna (North Monmouthshire) Financial Secretary to the Treasury,<sup>154</sup> some saw a bright future for the Welsh party. Brynmor Jones wrote to Alfred Thomas to explain that his search for a judicial appointment had been laid aside in view of the 'strong position' the Welsh party had attained.<sup>155</sup>

The announcement that D. A. Thomas had decided to rejoin the Welsh party appeared to confirm Brynmor Jones's belief. However, at the first meeting of the

147 Jones, *Lloyd George*, p.29.

148 *The Times*, 3 October 1902; GRO/PP/II.a.115: C. Tawelfryn Thomas to Alfred Thomas, 11 June 1902.

149 GRO/PP/IV.ii: Clement Thomas to Alfred Thomas, 21 November 1902; W. R. P. George, *Lloyd George: Backbencher* (Llandysul, 1983), p. 365.

150 *Western Mail*, 14 September 1905.

151 GRO/PP/IX.2: Bishop of Hereford to Alfred Thomas, 1 September 1905.

152 GRO/PP/IX.4: J. A. Spender to Alfred Thomas, 27 September 1905.

153 *Western Mail*, 27 November 1905.

154 Stephen McKenna, *Reginald McKenna: A Memoir* (London, 1948), p. 23.

155 GRO/PP/IV.ii: D. Brynmor Jones to Alfred Thomas, 1 February 1906.

enlarged party, it was clear that this was not a harmonious reunion. W. Llewelyn Williams, newly-elected MP for Carmarthen Boroughs, described the scene in his diary:

George, McKenna & Herbert Lewis were present. Everything went well till Vaughan Davies moved a resolution in favour of approaching the PM with regard to Disestablishment. The discussion was heated & even acrimonious. D. A. Thomas & Ellis Griffith took up a hostile attitude, & hinted distrust both of the Welsh members of the Govt & of C-B. They found little or no support. George, S. T. Evans, & I spoke in favour of delay, nothing was done.<sup>156</sup>

In many ways this set the stage for the actions of the Welsh party throughout the 1906–1910 parliament. The party had entered the electoral lists under the twin banners of disestablishment and non-denominational education. The latter question was postponed by the appointment of a Royal Commission on the Welsh Church,<sup>157</sup> while the latter proved the occasion for a great deal of ‘sound and fury’. A number of bills were proposed, each being rejected in turn, either by the Church as too favourable to Nonconformity, or by Nonconformity as being too favourable to the Church. By this time, Lloyd George had begun to favour a compromise on the issue. His regular presence at meetings of the Welsh party did not make Alfred Thomas’s position any easier. Ellis W. Davies, who replaced John Bryn Roberts as MP for South Caernarfonshire, described one such meeting, where certain clauses of the Government’s Education Bill were under consideration:

I have during the month attended a meeting of the Welsh MPs. The number present was 14, including Lloyd George. The Chairman was Sir Alfred Thomas. The subject for discussion was apparently the attitude of the members towards clause 4. Ll. G. took occasion to preach a sermon on the iniquity of independent thought on the Govt. Bill – so long as he is in the Government. Forgetting his own antics in 1894 he decried the ragging tendency of Welshmen, & like poacher turned gamekeeper he suspects that all others must be, as he was, a poacher.<sup>158</sup>

Lloyd George’s attempt to mollify Welsh demands by creating a Welsh National Council as part of the Education Bill was rejected by the Lords. An attempt by the President of the Board of Trade to use this as the stepping-stone for a campaign against the Lords backfired, a number of Welsh MPs, among them Alfred Thomas, calling instead for immediate action on Welsh disestablishment.<sup>159</sup> With Lloyd George’s riposte, clearly aimed at the Welsh MPs, that ‘those who harassed

156 NLW, W. Llewelyn Williams Papers, A1/2: diary entry for 14 February 1906.

157 NLW, W. Llewelyn Williams Papers, A1/2: diary entry for 12 April 1906.

158 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers, 6: diary entry for June 1906.

159 NLW, W. Llewelyn Williams Papers, A1/2: diary entry for 4 February 1907.

the Government when it was training its artillery on the House of Lords ought to be sent to the guard-room',<sup>160</sup> the stage seemed set for a major confrontation between Lloyd George and the Welsh party. On this occasion, however, it was the President of the Board of Trade who backed down. Lloyd George informed the 12 February meeting of the Welsh party that the Government had no intention of postponing Welsh disestablishment, unless the House of Lords forced their hand.<sup>161</sup> Alfred Thomas was not in the van of these controversies, the running being made by Ellis Griffith, Ellis Davies and D. A. Thomas.<sup>162</sup> Sir Alfred performed the less glamorous role of helping to keep the majority of Welsh MPs from making things difficult for the Liberal government.<sup>163</sup>

However, as the years went by, the position of the Welsh party and its chairman became increasingly difficult. The replacement of Campbell-Bannerman by Asquith in April 1908, and the consequent promotion of Lloyd George, did not prevent swelling discontent in the party's ranks. Asquith had less time for the Welsh members than Campbell-Bannerman, seemingly believing that Wales was Lloyd George's personal domain. Asked to see Asquith about appointing another Welshman to the Whips' Office if Herbert Lewis was promoted, Alfred Thomas explained to one Welsh MP that '[...] Asquith told him to see Lloyd George "as if" he said "I was his tool"'.<sup>164</sup> Frustration with the chairman continued to build through 1908.<sup>165</sup>

Alfred Thomas's efforts to satisfy all elements within the Welsh party, while keeping them inside the Liberal Party, began to break down under the pressure of these frustrations. With the disestablishment and education questions still unresolved, the more radical section of the Welsh party started to criticize the actions of their leaders. Ellis Davies and Walter Roch (Pembrokeshire) questioned the chairman's sincerity, while D. A. Thomas preferred to insult his intelligence. Ellis Davies described these reactions in his diary:

Alfred is a quiet mixture. He tells me he gives me more of his confidence than to any man & Roch tells me that he has cautioned him against me as 'a dangerous man'! D. A. Thomas in a letter to the 'South Wales Daily News' compares the intelligence of Alfred, H. R. & Brynmor Jones to that of his old cow 'Evergreen' – in private he adds he thinks he must apologise to the cow – ultimately he did in the Western Mail!<sup>166</sup>

160 Quoted by Ellis W. Davies, 'Welsh Political Notes', *The Welsh Review*, 2 (February 1907), p. 32.

161 NLW, W. Llewelyn Williams Papers, A1/2: diary entry for 16 February 1907.

162 GRO/PP/IV.ii: Ellis W. Davies to Alfred Thomas, 19 December 1906; NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers, 16/2: D. A. Thomas to Ellis Davies, 1 January, 1909.

163 John Grigg, *Lloyd George: The People's Champion 1902–1911* (London, 1978), pp. 150–1.

164 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers, 6: diary entry for 7 July 1908.

165 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers, 15/25: Walter Roch to Ellis W. Davies, 18 October 1908.

166 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers, 6: diary entry for 1 December 1908.

The Government's introduction of a Welsh Disestablishment Bill in early 1909 served to calm things down, as not even the most ardent Welsh radical could complain about it; unfortunately it ran out of time owing to the controversy over Lloyd George's 'People's Budget', so the great Liberal parliament failed to produce anything of note for its fractious Welsh supporters and their loyal chairman.

In the general election which followed, the Welsh party held its own, only two Welsh seats falling to the Conservatives. However, the English constituencies swung back towards the Unionists. The great Liberal majority of 1906 melted away, leaving the government once more dependent on the votes of the Irish Home Rulers.<sup>167</sup> Although this would also give greater power to the Welsh party, this brought only a consciousness of missed opportunities. Brynmor Jones observed bitterly:

I confess I am annoyed to think we have so little influence. I can see how we might in 1906/5 have made the Welsh Party a real power instead of allowing ourselves to be a mere appendage of the Whips' Office.<sup>168</sup>

Although a petition was presented to the government calling for swift action on Welsh disestablishment,<sup>169</sup> it was accepted that such action could not come until the settlement of the constitutional crisis.<sup>170</sup> By the time of its resolution, Sir Alfred Thomas would no longer be leading the Welsh party, having decided to retire from parliament. Charles Breese, Treasurer of the Welsh National Liberal Council, welcomed the development, observing:

[...] Sir Alfred has long been a picturesque but scarcely advanced or outspoken enough representative of present day Welsh Liberalism.<sup>171</sup>

When Alfred Thomas resigned from the House of Commons in December 1910, it was universally expected that he would be elevated to the House of Lords in the New Year's Honours list.<sup>172</sup> When the list was announced, however, Sir Alfred's name was conspicuous by its absence. Ellis Davies maliciously noted in his diary:

Sir Alfred Thomas gave up his seat on the understanding he would be made a peer – he let it be announced in the *South Wales Daily News* that his title would be Lord Thomas of Cardiff. It is however said that he has only Lloyd George's promise so he may wait in vain particularly as he was of course useless though he thought

167 GRO/PP/IV.ii: David Brynmor Jones to Alfred Thomas, 23 January 1910.

168 GRO/PP/IV.2.16: D. Brynmor Jones to Alfred Thomas, 8 August 1910.

169 *The Times*, 15 June 1910.

170 *South Wales Daily News*, 15 June 1910.

171 Cardiff Central Library, Cochfarf Papers: Charles E. Breese to Edward Thomas (Cochfarf), 19 April 1910.

172 NLW/PP/117: B. D. Johns to Alfred Thomas, 31 December 1910.

a good deal of the position – in the House a nonentity he was an admiring host, confiding in all – apparently he never had a good deal of cunning ‘R.I.P.’<sup>173</sup>

In fact, Thomas was raised to the peerage as Lord Pontypridd in the New Year’s Honours for 1912.<sup>174</sup> Although he continued to take an interest in Wales, serving on the governing bodies of the National Library, National Museum and University of Wales, his role in the politics of Liberal Wales largely ended with his time in the House of Commons.

Alfred Thomas entered the House of Commons after a successful business career and a successful career in local government, having served as mayor of the largest town in Wales. Accordingly, he had a great many expectations to meet at the outset of his political career, a career which spanned one of the most creative times in the politics of Wales. In the course of his parliamentary life, Alfred Thomas wore the garb of rebel and office-holder; if neither fitted him wholly comfortably, this was perhaps due to his desire to be liked. Certainly his isolation over the National Institutions (Wales) Bill caused Alfred Thomas to reassess his career. Having twice proposed measures to increase Welsh political autonomy, he made no further attempts after the general election of 1892. His 1890 amendment to the Address had not only been condemned by the then leaders of the Welsh parliamentary party, but had been savaged by Liberals on the floor of the House of Commons. Although the National Institutions (Wales) Bill initially met a warmer welcome, and his attempt to enlist Welsh civil society on the side of the bill had apparently borne fruit, in the final stretch it was abandoned by the majority of Welsh MPs, including some who had initially backed it. The practicalities of Welsh politics, it seems, killed a measure which was too moderate for the ‘advanced’ nationalists in Wales, and too advanced for the ‘moderate’ Welsh Liberals.

During the life of the 1892–5 Liberal governments, he found himself torn between different sections of the Welsh party, rebels and loyalists asking him to take their side. Lloyd George was sure that his departure from the secessionist movement in 1893 had been instrumental in causing several other Welsh MPs to return to the loyalist camp. In 1894, he twice implored Alfred Thomas to join the revolt against Lord Rosebery’s government, while Lloyd George’s opponents risked defeat by enlisting Thomas to move the resolution which would condemn the rebel members. This effort was, however, undermined by Alfred Thomas’s very real regard for Lloyd George. It was this regard which drew him into the Cymru Fydd movement, where he was, albeit for a brief period, titular leader of the ‘Welsh National Federation’, and contributed to his election as chairman of the Welsh party.

However, if Alfred Thomas’s regard for Lloyd George, and the latter’s respect for his integrity, served to advance Thomas’s career in the years before the Liberal

173 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers, 6: diary entry 6 February 1911.

174 NLW/PP/140: Lewis Harcourt to Alfred Thomas, 1 January 1912.

landslide of 1906, it brought no rewards once Lloyd George had entered the cabinet. Alfred Thomas's implied threat to an incoming Liberal government in 1905 alienated a section of English Liberals, at the same time ignoring the fact that Welsh disestablishment was not the only policy which appealed to Liberal supporters by 1905. While ecclesiastically-minded politicians on both sides could be forgiven for not noticing the other pressing demands on the government, Alfred Thomas, the municipal reformer who had taken an interest in the Poor Law earlier in his career, cannot be so easily forgiven for having devoted so much time to disestablishment and denominational education in the years 1905–10.

In general, a narrowing in the focus of Alfred Thomas's interests is evident between his amendment to the Address in 1890 and his departure from the Commons. This may be attributed in part to his need, when chairman of the Welsh party, to hold together a heterogeneous group of MPs, united solely by the fact of being Liberal MPs representing Welsh constituencies. As chairman, he was handicapped by parliamentary arithmetic; except for the period between January and December 1910, Alfred Thomas led the Welsh party in a House where they were unable to wield a deciding influence, and by 1910 the fight had largely gone out of him. While the Liberals were in government, it was perhaps inevitable that Welsh Liberals felt the government was not paying sufficient attention to Welsh affairs. Without an alteration to the veto powers of the House of Lords, there was a danger that Welsh disestablishment could absorb the energies of the government, only to be tossed aside by the Lords. And an appeal to the country on the Welsh disestablishment issue alone was unlikely to bring with it the support of large numbers of English voters, for whom the status of the Church in Wales was irrelevant. Thus, Alfred Thomas found his role during the 1906–10 parliament largely that of acting as an apologist for the government to his fellow Welsh Liberal MPs; a task almost guaranteed to be thankless. At the same time, a concentration on issues such as the representation of Wales in the royal arms, gave the impression that he was not taking his duties wholly seriously.

Alfred Thomas's career saw him rise to the head of the Welsh parliamentary party. It was, however, a career that not only ended in failure, as all political lives must, according to Enoch Powell,<sup>175</sup> but in irrelevance. Alfred Thomas's personal irrelevance preceded that of the Welsh Liberal Party by a mere twelve years. With the attainment of disestablishment and the acceptance of the 1902 Education Act, Welsh Liberalism found itself facing a world changed by the Great War without a positive modern programme. Like Alfred Thomas in 1910, Welsh Liberalism seemed a picturesque survival from a vanished past, neither advanced nor outspoken enough for the tastes of the rising generation. Like Isaac Butt, who also loyally led a nationalist party, it was Thomas's fate to be overshadowed by a more charismatic figure and to be forgotten by historians. However, as this article shows, a study of his career throws an interesting light on the problems of Welsh nationalist politics, and one not without contemporary echoes.

175 Enoch Powell, *Joseph Chamberlain* (London, 1977), p. 151.