

Ellis W. Davies and Eifion Politics, 1906–1918

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Ellis Davies (1871–1939) was one of the most able and impressive Welsh MPs during the early years of the twentieth century, representing the Eifion division of Caernarfonshire from a by-election in 1906 until his ignominious defeat in the ‘coupon’ general election of December 1918 when he stood as the Asquithian Liberal candidate for the new parliamentary division of Caernarfonshire. Yet his interesting political career has been but little discussed by political historians. Davies’s political credo was quite remarkable for his determination to side-line the traditional Liberal issues of disestablishment of the Welsh church, educational reforms, temperance legislation, and piecemeal concessions to devolutionary demands, all powerful legacies of the days of *Cymru Fydd*, in favour of a firm emphasis on social and economic themes, the core bread-and-butter issues of primary poverty, unemployment, substandard housing and ill health, and the pressing problems facing the large numbers of tenant farmers and quarryworkers among his constituents. Hence Davies’s ready support for the highly contentious land clauses of Lloyd George’s radical ‘People’s Budget’ of 1909.

Davies published an array of pungent, hard-hitting (and hence highly respected) articles in local newspapers and Welsh journals, and he delivered pointed speeches both in the House of Commons and on the stump. Many of his political standpoints were overtly socialistic, and he also displayed some support for nationalistic impulses primarily embodied in the campaign of his colleague E. T. John at that time. An uneasy, rather fractious relationship over many years with his political near neighbour David Lloyd George, who became a cabinet minister from December 1905 onwards, meant that Davies (like so many others) was not considered for even a junior ministerial position. When Lloyd George succeeded Asquith as Prime Minister at the end of 1916, Ellis Davies remained firmly in the Asquithian camp, a commitment which led to his defeat, at the bottom of the poll, in the 1918 general election in the new constituency of Caernarfonshire following an especially venomous election campaign.

Almost uniquely among Welsh politicians of that period, Ellis W. Davies penned a detailed diary of events, full of perspicacious comments, and he also squirrelled away carefully the correspondence and papers which came his way. These papers came to the National Library of Wales in 1985 as part of the estate of the recently deceased Professor Sir Idris Foster, and were later supplemented by further papers deposited by Ellis Davies’s son Richard H. Ellis Davies of Caernarfon in August 1998. This archive forms the basis of the present article.

Ellis William Davies was born at Gerlan, Bethesda, Caernarfonshire on 12 April 1871, the son of David and Catherine Davies. His mother was a member of the Williams family of Tyddyn Sabel, Bethesda, while his father earned his living

as a local quarry official at the local Penrhyn quarry.¹ Ellis Davies was educated at the Carneddi Board School, Bethesda, until 1884, and subsequently at Liverpool College, and the Liverpool Institute. The Sunday school, too, had assumed a central role in his upbringing. Ill-health intervened, and Davies's schooling ceased at the age of fifteen. From a notably early age, he had set his sights on qualifying as a solicitor, but (for reasons which remain rather unclear), he spent the first six years of his working life as a clerk in insurance offices at Wrexham, initially as a junior clerk in the employ of the Provincial Life Insurance Company, and later at Sheffield, where his employer was the Alliance Insurance Company. These were not, however, wasted years, for they instilled in Ellis Davies a marked aptitude for organization and efficiency which thereafter remained with him for the rest of his days.

While working at Wrexham, he also developed a zeal for preaching in the chapels of the Calvinistic Methodists in Flintshire, Denbighshire and further south along the border areas, an activity which appealed greatly to him. Davies then returned from Sheffield to study law, serving his apprenticeship with David Griffith Davies, solicitor, at Bethesda. His articles of apprenticeship, dated July 1894, were scheduled to run for five years. In 1899, he passed the final examinations in law with first class honours, was placed fourth in the list of successful candidates, and was awarded a prestigious prize (comprising five guineas of printed books) by the London Law Society. A little later he migrated to Caernarfon and entered into a legal partnership with R. O. Roberts, solicitor of Caernarfon, an arrangement which lasted for a year. Later he set up a legal company known as Messrs Ellis Davies, Jones and Jones at Caernarfon. The town was to become Davies's home for the rest of his life. In 1901, Ellis Davies had married Mary Grace (Minnie), the youngest daughter of Richard and Jane Hughes of Porthmadoc, the ceremony being solemnized at Tabernacle CM Chapel, Porthmadoc co-jointly by the Rev. J. J. Roberts ('Iolo Carnarvon') and the bridegroom's cousin, the Revd. W. R. Owen of Portdinorwic.

Ellis Davies also maintained extensive business interests and, as an acknowledged authority on the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1897, he rendered sterling service, too, as the solicitor to the North Wales Quarrymen's Union at a critical time in its history. In his profession, he soon earned a well-deserved reputation as an insightful, careful, and just individual. Davies's innate interest in political life burgeoned at this time. In 1904, he was elected a member of the Caernarfonshire County Council, representing the Gerlan ward, Bethesda. At his first council meeting on 17 March, Davies was elected a member of the following committees: joint police, finance, general purposes, allotments, and parliamentary. He soon became an alderman of the council. In March 1905, Davies went to London, an experience which he clearly savoured, and on the tenth of the month:

Spent most of the day in the House of Commons. Met William

1 Idris Foster, 'Ellis William Davies (1871–1939)', in *Dictionary of Welsh Biography, 1941–1970* (London, 2001), p. 324. Many details of Davies's early life are available in National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, Davies's diary up to May 1910.

Jones, MP for Arfon, Lloyd George, and Keir Hardie, the Labour representative for Merthyr Tydfil – a keen conscientious Scotchman, knows his own mind, determined, & likely to succeed. Dined with Bryn Roberts – the ablest and in discussion the fairest man I ever met, cynical, fights straight but no incentive to great effort, would make an admirable judge.²

Ever since his days at Wrexham, Ellis Davies had contributed columns to the local press discussing current political themes with cogency and conviction. At a meeting of the Caernarfonshire County Council, an eloquent David Lloyd George entranced both his fellow-councillors and the journalists present as he fiercely denounced the provisions of the Balfour Education Act of 1902 and proudly revealed details of his own plan to circumvent the measure. As ‘the Welsh Wizard’ spoke, the ‘harsh voice’ of Ellis W. Davies broke across him ‘most inopportunistly’, calling the attention of his audience to the state of employment in the Bethesda quarry district – ‘That intervention was characteristic of Ellis Davies, never a respecter of persons or of popular prejudices.’³ Lloyd George’s silvery-tongued magic was at once destroyed, and thence began a personal animosity between the two men which continued for decades. Throughout these years Davies had given staunch service to the membership of the North Wales Quarryman’s Union.

Such was Ellis Davies’s contribution to local political life that he was chosen as secretary to the Eifion (South Caernarfonshire) Liberal Association where he became much respected for his highly individualistic, radical viewpoints. During the early months of 1906 he published a series of articles in *Y Genedl Gymreig* entitled ‘Tlodi’r Werin’ (‘The poverty of the ordinary people’) in which he challenged cogently the widely-held belief at the time that poverty was simply the well-deserved fate of the indolent and lazy in society. Ellis Davies presented new, striking facts relating to the distribution of wealth in British society and to the composition of the working and middle classes. His analysis, a real eye-opener to many, was widely heeded and respected. Davies showed clearly that the assumed differentials between the so-called working classes, the farmers and shopkeepers, and professional people like doctors and lawyers, were largely unreal. His writings in the north Wales press were unfailingly lucid, reasoned and convincing and they made Davies’s name as the prophet of the new economic policies. They much enhanced Davies’s reputation as a potential career politician and paved the way for his election to parliament. He was probably the first prominent Welsh Liberal to accord a consistent priority to social questions over and above the Disestablishment of the Welsh church and the other traditional planks in the well-worn nonconformist political programme.

The Eifion division of Caernarfonshire, the southern district of the county, did not witness a contested general election in January 1906 which saw a landslide Liberal victory at the polls throughout the realm. As in 1895 and 1900, Gladstonian arch-loyalist John Bryn Roberts was once more returned unopposed to parliament

2 Ibid., diary entry for 10 March 1905.

3 Cited in an appreciation of Ellis Davies in the *Manchester Guardian*, 1 May 1939, p. 15.

which meant, of course, that no real electioneering activity was required in the constituency. But a conviction had certainly grown up locally that the traditional Liberal issues were no longer relevant to the needs of contemporary society. A party rally at Caernarfon during the election campaign had drawn censure from the editorial pen of *Y Genedl Gymreig* which chastised the dissipation of energy on political issues for which ‘the battle is over’. It ventured the opinion that Liberal Party leaders, prone to verbosity, were neglecting ‘the problems of today’. The eventual achievement of disestablishment of the Welsh church, it went on, would ‘not prevent man from having to seek charity not stop them from walking the country looking for work’.⁴ In the widely read newspaper, its editor William Eames pointed up the inadequate wages paid to local quarry workers and the raw deal suffered by farmers and farm labourers. The line taken by Eames inevitably incurred the wrath and enmity of local Liberal Party leaders like the Rev. Evan Jones of Moriah chapel, Caernarfon and Ellis Jones Ellis-Griffith, the MP for Anglesey.⁵

The lack of a contest in the Eifion division in January 1906 meant that Ellis Davies was thus free to participate in the election campaigns of neighbouring divisions. One of Davies’s many election speeches was in support of David Lloyd George on 16 January at the Guildhall, Caernarfon, where a large, appreciative audience saw his considerable political potential. Five days previously, on 11 January, he had also addressed a public meeting at Brynrefail in support of William Jones (Arfon). Although at this point he had certainly not become a slick platform performer, his audiences were unfailingly impressed by the strikingly novel contents of his speeches and his constant logical, reasoned approach to political issues. A few months later J. Bryn Roberts was appointed a county court judge for Glamorganshire, and the choice of the Eifion Liberal Association fell on Ellis W. Davies as his successor. Davies could depend upon the staunch support of William Eames and *Y Genedl Gymreig* and the backing of the North Wales Quarryman’s Union whose membership, following a spirited discussion, had resolved not to bring out an independent Labour candidate.⁶

A list of five possible contenders was soon reduced to three – D. P. Williams, the chairman of the county education authority, T. E. Morris and Ellis Davies.⁷ From the outset Davies was keenly interested in the vacant candidature, personally attempting to influence the choice of district delegates at the final selection meeting.⁸ Observing the course of events at Eifion very closely, Lloyd George threw his weight firmly behind the selection of D. P. Williams, writing to his brother William,

From what I learn, D. P. is getting on [...] With anything like organisation in securing the smaller districts & in bringing up every available delegate to the meeting at Pwllheli, there ought to be no

4 Leader column in *Y Genedl Gymreig*, 9 Ionawr 1906 (translation).

5 William Eames, ‘Brithgofion Newyddiadurwr’, *Y Genhinen*, 13 (1962–63), p. 75ff.

6 *Y Genedl Gymreig*, 24 Ebrill 1906; *North Wales Chronicle*, 11 May 1906.

7 The other two possible aspirants for the nomination were Howell J. Williams and J. V. Edwards. The name of D. R. Daniel, secretary of the North Wales Quarrymen’s Union, was also mentioned in connection with the vacancy: *The Times*, 13 April 1906, p. 8.

8 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 15/7, Ellis W. Davies to ‘Evan’, 16 April 1906.

difficulty in securing a substantial majority for D. P. Were Ellis Davies a young Welshman of the right sort, it would have been one's duty to support him. I helped William Jones against D. P., but Ellis D is 75 per cent charlatan – & that is too high a percentage of adulteration even for public life. Moreover he is a refractory one – nis gellir dim o honno. He would give trouble for purposes of self advertisement.⁹

Williams had given immense support to Lloyd George in his revolt against the provisions of Balfour's Education Act of 1902 and had evidently earned his gratitude. But Lloyd George's nominee D. P. Williams was soon to withdraw from the race, and Ellis Davies, hailed in the local press as 'the workingman's hero [...] the Labour candidate par excellence', and benefiting from the solid support of the quarrymen in the Eifion division, eventually defeated T. E. Morris for the nomination by 2875 votes to 2503.¹⁰ During the period of the contest for the nomination, Ellis Davies told the local press of his 'surprise at the serious attention' displayed at the meetings to

intricate questions – for instance security of tenure for farmers, Labour questions and the question of rating [...] The people take much more interest in these questions than in the question of disestablishment. This seems to be treated as having been settled, the solution of the difficulty being now merely a matter of time.¹¹

But the affair was certainly shrouded in much unpleasantness and in threat and counter-accusation relating to unfair tactics in the selection procedures.¹² Rumours of a deep-rooted rift among the local membership persisted for some time, but in June Davies was elected unopposed to parliament.¹³ In his draft memoirs penned in the 1930s, Davies recalled,

I was concerned for old age pensions, for the unemployed rather than Disestablishment which I described as secondary to social questions, the evils of the [Balfour] Education Act concerned me less than poverty, resulting in bad housing, ill health, in a high infantile mortality rate. In my own county it was 140 per 1000, it is still one of the highest in England and Wales.¹⁴

- 9 NLW, William George Papers 1796, D. Lloyd George to William George, ? 28 April 1906.
- 10 *North Wales Chronicle*, 11 May 1906, where there is an interesting editorial column entitled 'The Eivion Radicals'. The same issue published the full text of D. P. Williams's interesting resignation letter. The result of the contest for the Eifion nomination was published in the *North Wales Chronicle*, 25 May 1906.
- 11 *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 4 May 1906.
- 12 See the full reports published in *Y Genedl Gymreig*, 1 and 15 May 1906.
- 13 Cyril Parry, 'A Note on the Eifion By-Election of 1906', *Transactions of the Caernarfonshire Historical Society*, 30 (1969), 79–86.
- 14 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 37, draft memoirs by Davies.

Introduced in the House of Commons in June 1906 by his political near neighbours D. Lloyd George and William Jones, Davies swiftly found his feet at Westminster, savouring the company of fellow politicians like the prominent Liberal MPs Sir Leo Chiozza Money and C. P. Trevelyan whose published writings he had long admired. The companionship of the Commons clearly appealed to him:

During the first few days I received great kindness at the hands of members who gave me introductions & assisted me generally. My first impression was that of the equality among members: position & appearance seem to be but very little considered, much less than in local councils.¹⁵

Fears had sprung up from the conviction of some South Caernarfonshire Liberals that Davies would champion only the interests and concerns of the local quarrying communities to the likely detriment of the more numerous farming families in the area. Ellis Davies himself proudly recorded in his diary that, during his very first week at Westminster, he had met John Burns, who had recently been appointed by the new Liberal Prime Minister Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman to the prestigious cabinet position of President of the Local Government Board, the first member of the working-class to become a government minister. Burns had asked Davies, ‘What brings you here?’, to which the new MP had promptly replied, ‘The unemployed.’ The veteran Burns had retorted, ‘Take care they don’t throw you out again.’¹⁶

It was indeed the question of the unemployed which Ellis Davies took as the theme of his accomplished maiden speech in the House on 19 July 1906, making, it was recorded, ‘an excellent impression’.¹⁷ In this speech, Davies drew on his extensive experience as chairman of the Committee of the Unemployed appointed by the Carnarvon County Council. He confidently attributed high levels of unemployment to the migration of peasants and labourers from rural areas because of insecurity of tenure and paucity of allotments. General inefficiency he attributed to the onset of sickness and old age. He urged the government to embark upon agrarian reforms and public utility works such as improvements to main roads.¹⁸ That summer the National Eisteddfod came to Caernarfon, and Ellis Davies invited Judge J. Bryn Roberts and D. A. Thomas MP (Merthyr Tydfil) to take tea at his home – ‘Talk of Welsh politics. BR expressed opinion Lloyd George would not assist any other Welshman to get into Government’.¹⁹

It is evident that Ellis Davies was already playing a prominent role in political life. In October 1906 he addressed a conference convened by the Welsh Liberal Council at the Park Hotel, Cardiff, taking as his theme the land question – ‘Put to speak last – after Llewelyn Williams & [William] Brace, both Lloyd George’s

15 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, diary entry for 12 June 1906; NLW, E. Morgan Humphreys Papers A/138, Ellis Davies to Humphreys, 13 June 1906.

16 Cited in an appreciation of Ellis Davies in the *Manchester Guardian*, 1 May 1939, p. 15.

17 *Manchester Guardian*, 20 July 1906.

18 *Ibid.*

19 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, diary entry for 22 August 1906.

friends'.²⁰ Nine days later,

Spoke at Llanystumdwy on Land Bill & advocated purchase by tenant as only solution of land question with provision that, if money advanced by community, the tenant could not resell without first giving option to the County Council to prevent land again becoming vested in hands of a few persons.²¹

In November 1906, Davies spoke in the House of Commons during the debate on the Land Tenure Bill, speaking out against a Conservative amendment to one of the clauses in the measure relating to compensation for disturbances. Later he voted with 166 other Liberal rebels against the government's acceptance of a Tory amendment to the measure – 'Rank & file of party very indignant at concessions made to Tory party.'²² He was evidently one of many Liberal backbenchers who were ready to voice their disapproval forcefully, outraged as they clearly were at this blatant collusion with the Tory opposition and the landed enemy.

Ellis Davies's political interests were very much apparent. On the last day of January 1907, he addressed a meeting at the Liberal Club, Aberystwyth on the theme 'Causes of poverty':

Stayed night with D. Charles Roberts [...] After meeting we were joined by Mr R's cousin J. H. Davies, M.A., Cwrtnawr & Registrar of the University College. As old chum of Bryn Roberts & brother-in-law of late T. E. Ellis, he is well versed in Welsh politics. He considers Ll George abler than is generally assumed, that he had more method than his Welsh colleagues credit him with, but that his strength lies in his capacity to turn an apparent failure to at least a seeming success. In this he is greatly helped in that he is not overburdened with convictions.²³

Social issues dominated Davies's thoughts, the bread-and-butter issues which remained close to the hearts of the local quarrying communities. Consequently, he was at best luke-warm to Welsh nationalist impulses voiced at this time:

When did the Nationalists support the Quarrymen in their fight against feudalism? [...] Our schools and colleges were built with their hard-earned pence [...] What help has been rendered to them in their struggles by those who benefited most by their sacrifices? [...] To talk to these men of the beauties of the Welsh language is to talk of art to a slum dweller, and to speak of Welsh Home Rule is to

20 Ibid., diary entry for 11 October 1906.

21 Ibid., diary entry for 20 October 1906.

22 Ibid., diary entry for 14 November 1906. See Ian Packer, *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land: The Land Issue and Party Politics in England, 1906–1914* (London, 2001), p. 41.

23 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, diary entry for 31 January 1907.

under-estimate their political sagacity and to offer stone for bread.²⁴

Davies felt strongly that the Welsh Disestablishment Bill currently before parliament needed to be postponed, ‘not because of the [House of] Lords, but because the question of the Church is itself of secondary importance as compared with social and financial questions’.²⁵ Indeed, the fate of the unemployed remained central to Ellis Davies’s political thoughts as he viewed with mounting concern ‘the apathy’ of the Local Government Board and its president John Burns who, in Davies’s view, adopted ‘a harsh & unsympathetic tone’ in debates on the subject, ‘lacking imagination & over-burdened with a sense of his own importance’.²⁶

He greeted warmly the establishment of the Welsh Education Department under Owen M. Edwards in 1907, and he hoped that the Small Holdings Bill would prove highly beneficial to Welsh farmers – ‘Welshmen would be freemen and not the servile tenants of an alien race.’²⁷ The question of agricultural smallholdings was clearly very close to Davies’s heart. Within the Eifion electoral division some 80 per cent of holdings were less than fifty acres in size or less than £50 per annum in value. This prevalence of small-scale farmsteads had led to a substantial increase in rents in the five counties of north Wales since 1877, while the level of rents had decreased in the English counties by some 50 per cent. Davies urged the establishment of credit societies to enable small-scale farmers to obtain the credit necessary to continue in business. It was his belief that the government should lend money to the county councils so that the councils might make available sums to the farming community at low interest rates.²⁸ The same year, 1908, saw the introduction of the payment of Old Age Pensions by Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer in Asquith’s administration formed in April. Ellis Davies was quick to ask how the income or profits of the smallholder or small-scale tenant farmer might affect his right to receive his pension.²⁹

The time devoted to the disestablishment legislation caused much frustration to Ellis Davies and his more radical, socialistic colleagues within the Liberal Party. As Walter Roch, the Liberal MP for Pembrokeshire, wrote to Davies at the beginning of 1909,

Our difficulty is that Welsh politics at present is represented in one word – Disestablishment, & we have to create a new school of thought. I have great hopes of our younger men [...] but I am afraid the next few years (unless the franchise is extended) will see the triumph of the moderate Liberal section.³⁰

24 Ellis W. Davies, ‘Welsh Political Notes’, *The Welsh Review*, January 1907, p. 4.

25 Idem, ‘Welsh Political Notes’, *The Welsh Review*, February 1907, p. 33.

26 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, diary entry for 20 February 1907.

27 Ellis W. Davies, ‘Welsh Political Notes’, *The Welsh Review*, March 1907, p. 56.

28 Ellis W. Davies, ‘Small Holdings and Agricultural Credit’, *Journal of the University College of Wales Agricultural Society*, 1 (1908), 1–10. This article was the text of Davies’s annual address delivered to the Society.

29 *The Times*, 9 January 1909, p. 10.

30 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 16/3, Walter F. Roch to Davies, 3 January 1909 (‘Private’).

Speaking in the Commons in February, Ellis Davies tended to agree with the Labour Members that the tiresome disestablishment legislation would act as ‘a barrier to legislation on unemployment [...] He was sure that if it came to allotting the time of the House between the Disestablishment Bill and unemployed legislation, the majority of the Welsh members would vote in favour of the unemployed (Hear, hear) [...] The exigencies of the unemployed problem could not be denied’. In the same peroration, Davies strongly endorsed the proposal to set up labour exchanges, increased afforestation and the award of government grants to the county councils to improve the country’s main roads.³¹ His frustration at the slow-moving course of events at Westminster had led him to conclude that political life was ‘terribly dull’.³² His dejection only increased as Asquith, in a powerful speech, duly introduced the Disestablishment Bill in the Commons on 21 April 1909. Ellis Davies continued to plough his own furrow, again speaking in the House in May on the high rents levied by the county councils in Wales for smallholdings and the high rates of interest charged by the government for loans. He also argued that dairy farmers should be compensated by the Board of Agriculture in cases where their milk had been rejected because their cows suffered from tuberculosis.³³

When in June, however, the government threatened to withdraw the Welsh Disestablishment Bill following its second reading in the House, Ellis Davies and Walter Roch emerged as the instigators of a ‘Welsh revolt’ against the intention, and memories of the Lloyd George inspired rebellion against the Rosebery government back in 1894 were revived. It was recorded that at least twelve Welsh MPs supported such a move, and there was talk that an independent Welsh party, modelled on the Irish, might well now emerge, conjecture fanned by reports from many Welsh constituencies of avid backing on the ground.³⁴ Recorded Davies,

I did this not because the Government could be expected to alter its decision or that I was very much interested in Disestablishment, but because I wished to bring to a point the question of the relation of the Party & Party whips to the Welsh MPs as we were never consulted & had no assistance from the Whips in getting an opportunity to speak in the House.³⁵

Conjecture that something of a rift still remained within the ranks of the local Liberals in the Eifion division encouraged local Conservatives to put up their own candidate in the person of F. J. Lloyd Priestley, a prominent local landowner, to oppose Ellis Davies in the general election of January 1910. In the local election campaign, Priestley avidly supported the action of the House of Lords in throwing out Lloyd George’s 1909 ‘People’s Budget’ and argued in favour of a policy of tariff

31 *The Times*, 18 February 1909, p. 9.

32 NLW, E. Morgan Humphreys Papers A/140, Ellis W. Davies to Humphreys, 28 May 1908.

33 *The Times*, 7 May 1909, p. 6.

34 *Ibid.*, 14 June 1909, p. 7.

35 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, diary entry for 10 June 1909.

reform.³⁶ Davies was, however, re-elected by a most substantial record majority in this Liberal heartland: 6118 votes to 1700. Nationally, the Liberals won 274 seats and the Conservatives 272. There were also 71 Irish Nationalists and 40 Labour MPs in the new House of Commons. ‘Things have worked out in a very curious way,’ wrote Walter Roch to Ellis Davies in a letter of congratulation, ‘& I am rather afraid that we shall find it very unsatisfactory. What an opportunity if only there was anything (even a pretence) of a Welsh party.’³⁷

Ellis Davies had spent the Sunday before the declaration of the poll at Lloyd George’s expansive new home, Brynawelon, in Criccieth. The two men, whose relationship remained rather uneasy, had discussed Davies’s likely majority in the Eifion division. Davies had ventured 4000 votes, to which a testy LG had replied, ‘You should be very satisfied if you got 2000’. A few days later a *Daily News* journalist present at the National Liberal Club when the Eifion result was announced reported to Davies that Lloyd George ‘looked very displeased’ at the size of his majority.³⁸ Lloyd George’s own majority in the Caernarfon Boroughs, which he had estimated to Ellis Davies would be between 700 and 800 votes, was, in fact, 1078.³⁹

One of the reasons for Davies’s record majority in January 1910 was that he had enjoyed the avid support of all the Labour elements within his constituency. The Nantlle lodge of the North Wales Quarrymen’s Union had encouraged its membership to contribute to Davies’s election fund; the officials of the Union, R. T. Jones among them, had addressed election meetings on Davies’s behalf; and his nomination papers had been signed by both the President and the Vice-president of the NWQU.⁴⁰ From this point on, Ellis Davies was to enjoy the company and friendship at Westminster of Henry Haydn Jones, the newly elected Liberal MP for the Merioneth division, and a most influential local businessman and quarry owner, also one who was immensely powerful in local government circles in the county. On his return to the House in February 1910, recorded Davies, ‘Old members with whom I had but a nodding acquaintance previously shook hands most freely as if

36 See the reports in the *North Wales Chronicle*, 14 and 21 January 1910.

37 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 17/5, Walter F. Roch to Davies, 29 January 1910. He continued, ‘I’m afraid the result is a great blow to L.G.’s prestige. People here say that his violent talk cost us 40 or 50 seats, & the wirepullers would not let him come near the House towards the end, saying that his presence would be fatal. This is a bit stiff I think, for if he lost us seats in the Counties he must have won us a few in the Boroughs. The territorial screw is strong in England & was used to the full. Don’t you think we are bound to have another election next year?’ For the significance of the outcome of the January 1910 general election in the context of the abortive second home rule campaign of these years, see J. Graham Jones, ‘E. T. John and Welsh Home Rule’, *Welsh History Review*, 13.4 (December 1987), 453ff.

38 NLW, Ellis W. Davies papers 69, typescript diary notes by Davies. The *Daily Mail* journalist had apparently quizzed Davies about his relationship with Lloyd George: ‘I said that we were quite friendly and then he went on to say, “It was not always so, was it?”’

39 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, diary entry for 23 January 1910. The point needs to be made, however, that the total electorate of the Eifion division ran to 9455 individuals, while that of the Caernarfon Boroughs was a significantly smaller 5717.

40 See Cyril Parry, ‘Socialism in Gwynedd’ (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales, 1967), pp. 103–4.

way of thanksgiving for having been saved the fate of our friends in the election.⁴¹

Ellis Davies, believing that the passage of Lloyd George's 1909 'People's Budget' was essential for the future of democracy in Britain, became a prominent member of the so-called Budget League, chaired by Winston Churchill, and set up to co-ordinate support for the contentious budget. Davies was especially active, too, in the deliberations of the Small Holdings Committee of the Caernarfonshire County Council. He felt some indignation that he was not chosen to sit on the important Mines Commission, losing out to R. T. Jones, general secretary of the NWQU, who had been nominated by his union as the north Wales representative.⁴² Davies was also approached in August by the retired Middlesbrough ironmaster E. T. John as he prepared to launch publicly his home rule campaign, in the hope that Davies might assist in securing the publication of a letter in the *Liverpool Daily Post*. John hoped, too, that the local Welsh press might respond to his initiative.⁴³ At the end of the month Davies met with John and Haydn Jones at Tywyn to discuss matters.⁴⁴ Ellis Davies gave, it would appear, tentative, qualified support to John's audacious devolution campaign.

Following discussions with him, the old home rule campaigner Beriah Gwynfe Evans, veteran of Cymru Fydd, reported to E. T. John: 'Ellis Davies. I have seen him three times in succession with unsatisfactory results. He is not ready to move definitely without doing so in co-operation with Haydn Jones, [Walter] Roch and [F.W.] Gibbins.'⁴⁵ Within days, however, now informed that supportive interviews with W. Llewelyn Williams and Ellis Davies were about to appear in the Welsh press, B. G. Evans's enthusiasm grew:

Things are shaping well – better than I expected. There will appear in Friday's papers a couple of Interviews – one with Llewelyn Williams MP (Carmarthen Boros) & the other with Ellis Davies. Llewelyn is on intimate terms with Lloyd George, & his interview is decidedly significant, opening with the statement that 'Home Rule all Round will be forced into startling prominence in the early future' – and there is a reasoned argument showing why. Ellis Davies is coming into line. He opens with the statement that if the Irish Party desire Federal Home Rule we can get it with comparatively little difficulty. Simultaneity is as essential as similarity. He however raises certain points which will require to be considered – but he endorses the principle of the demand. I am expecting further explicit & emphatic endorsements. I believe if I were in Parliament I should

41 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, diary entry for 15 (or possibly 16) February 1910.

42 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 17/15 and 17/16, C. F. G. Masterman, the Home Office, to Davies, 4 June ('Private') and 8 June 1910.

43 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 17/29, E. T. John to Ellis Davies, 6 August 1910. The letter was published in the *Manchester Guardian*, 8 August 1910.

44 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, diary entry for 30 August 1910.

45 NLW, E. T. John Papers 45, Beriah Gwynfe Evans to John, 7 October 1910. F. W. Gibbins was the Liberal MP for the Mid-Glamorgan division from the March 1910 by-election until the following December when he stood down.

have but little difficulty comparatively in effecting an alliance with the Scottish Nationalists.⁴⁶

Indeed, the executive committee of the Eifion Liberal Association soon became ‘rather favourable to Home Rule’, and requested their MP to ‘make an impartial statement on the question’ at the forthcoming annual conference, leading to the moving of a resolution. But, Ellis Davies warned E. T. John, ‘The financial side of the question needs serious consideration.’⁴⁷ Such indeed was the MP’s message to the annual conference, where he ‘expressed [his] opinion that its financial bearings deserved the serious consideration of Wales before decision is arrived at’.⁴⁸ The leaders of the movement remained in regular contact with Ellis Davies,⁴⁹ encouraged indeed by the publication at the end of October 1910 in the influential *Y Genedl Gymreig* of a substantial article from the pen of Ellis Davies calling for the setting up of an ‘Independent Welsh Party’ at Westminster. Davies made the point that the government in power since the beginning of the year was really ‘a coalition of groups’ as a result of which distinctly ‘sectional legislation’ had been passed. He continued:

There are two sections of the Irish Party, a Labour Party, and now a Scottish Party, one and all pressing forward their own particular claims, and each in turn receiving consideration. Wales has sought in vain for similar recognition, although her national needs, ideals, and aspirations are so essentially different from those of England. A Land Bill has been granted to Scotland, but refused to Wales. Scotland has secured an Education Act harmonizing with the national genius, but no attempt has been made to do this for Wales. Ireland has had its Land Act; a new house and an acre of land has been provided for the Irish agricultural labourer at a rental of a shilling a week – but nothing for Wales. The Irish University, an essentially denominational institution, has been richly endowed – but only a few thousands grudgingly given to the maintenance of the Welsh national colleges established by the sacrifices of the impoverished working classes of Wales. Wales has for decades demanded Disestablishment, but the opposition of the House of Lords is advanced as an excuse for not passing the measure. But if the House of Lords is an obstacle

46 Ibid. 47, B. G. Evans to John, 12 October 1910.

47 Ibid. 50, Ellis W. Davies to John, 16 October 1910.

48 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, diary entry for 5 November 1910. The annual conference is reported in detail in the *North Wales Chronicle*, 11 November 1910. Here Ellis Davies had initiated a discussion on the establishment of national councils for England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, then moving a resolution that such councils should enjoy ‘the power to legislate on matters which are not common to the whole kingdom, and to superintend the administration of the laws dealing with such matters’. But, ‘when the question came before Parliament, he would expect the representatives of Wales to see that the financial arrangements were such that Wales would not be placed under a disadvantage when it obtained Home Rule (applause)’. This resolution was then carried unanimously at the conference.

49 NLW, E. T. John Papers 59, B. G. Evans to John, 26 November 1910.

to Disestablishment, why should not the Nonconformity of the present Government be a sufficient reason for not calling upon its Nonconformist supporters to pass the Bishopsrics Bill?⁵⁰

By this time, political life was dominated by talk of the imminent dissolution of parliament which in fact occurred on 28 November 1910, and a second general election within the same year, under the shadow of the Parliament Bill, was now imminent. Ellis Davies was returned unopposed in the Eifion division of Caernarfonshire. Had a Conservative stood there, Davies, it was agreed on all sides, was assured of a large majority. His local popularity was certainly well deserved. He had been fully responsive to the needs of the local farming communities whose total population far outnumbered that of the local quarrymen.⁵¹ In particular, Davies had put pressure on the Caernarfonshire County Council to lend assistance to local farmers to purchase their holdings which had become available as a result of the sale of parts of the Penrhyn estate.

Davies was also a leading force behind the formation of a county agricultural society. His mastery of facts and statistics had won him the ready commendation of local farmers. Davies had participated effectively in parliamentary debates on agricultural issues and he had also asked a number of pertinent questions in the House of Commons on accidents in the quarries. He was seen as a champion of Welsh issues, one who had readily joined forces in the Commons with Walter Roch (Pembrokeshire) and Henry Haydn Jones (Merionethshire). Although Ellis Davies certainly lacked the fiery eloquence and charisma of David Lloyd George (Caernarfon Boroughs), and the silvery-tongued diction of William Jones (Caernarfonshire North: Arfon), his political near-neighbours, his reasoned exposition impressed his listeners both in the House of Commons and in his constituency, including the members of his Sunday School class at Moriah chapel, Caernarfon. At Westminster he had certainly evoked powerful memories of the late Thomas Edward Ellis MP (1859–1899).

Ellis Davies's many admirers predicted a brilliant future for him as a politician. In the amendment to the King's Speech in February 1911, now elected joint-secretary to the Welsh Parliamentary Party, he regretted that it contained no provision for the establishment of a Welsh Department of Agriculture or other measures to improve agriculture in Wales, and soon afterwards he arranged a meeting with Herbert Asquith, the Prime Minister, to press the point. In consequence, it was agreed that Welsh inspectors of agriculture be appointed, that orders be issued in the Welsh language, and that some change in personnel would ensue.⁵² A month later, Davies was a member of a deputation which waited upon Asquith to ascertain his views on the progress of disestablishment of the Welsh church.⁵³

Davies certainly made his mark as a member of the departmental committee

50 Translated in *The Times*, 1 November 1910, p. 10.

51 See Henry Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885–1910* (London and New York, 1967), pp. 363 and 365–6.

52 *The Times*, 11 February 1911, p. 10; *ibid.*, 15 February 1911, p. 10; NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, diary entry for 14 February 1911.

53 *The Times*, 8 March 1911, p. 8.

on landed estates set up in March 1911. Its primary purpose was to examine the position of tenant farmers in England and Wales on the occasion of any change in the ownership of holdings.⁵⁴ Davies was assiduous in attending the meetings of the committee and consistently pressed for the introduction of legislation relating specifically to Wales. Its report, eventually published in January 1912, focussed primarily on compensation for improvements and the state-aided purchase of agricultural holdings [Cd. 6030].⁵⁵ Also in March 1911, Davies had introduced in the House of Commons a Wages Bill which laid down that the wages paid to workmen must be paid at intervals of no longer than fourteen days, and this was given a nominal first reading in the House.⁵⁶ In the summer, he proudly attended the investiture ceremony of Edward, Prince of Wales at Caernarfon castle on 13 July and the auspicious ceremony the following day when King George V opened the completed expansive buildings at the University College of North Wales, Bangor. But shortly afterwards the family sustained a most cruel blow in the death of the Davies' young daughter.

Ellis Davies was also a prominent member of the departmental committee on the jury system set up in December 1911: 'I ascertained it was Lloyd George's special desire I should act & that that for that purpose he had had another M.P. taken off the Committee.'⁵⁷ The committee owed its origins to the current dissatisfaction with special juries especially and to the verdicts returned in cases of political libel.⁵⁸ Above all, Davies remained wholly committed to land and tenurial issues, and he became a prominent member of the unofficial land enquiry committee initiated by Lloyd George in 1912 as Chancellor of the Exchequer. Here Davies was seen as the chosen representative of Welsh radicalism on the committee.⁵⁹ Throughout his political career he remained passionately interested in agricultural and tenurial matters. The issue was especially lively at this time, in the wake of the publication and recommendations of the report of the committee on landed estates at the beginning of the year. Many of Davies's own constituents and those in neighbouring divisions were attracted by the prospect of governmental loans to purchase their holdings, especially as it was known that Lord Penrhyn planned to sell off much of his extensive landed estate. Many of Penrhyn's tenants were anxious to buy their holdings.⁶⁰ But political life at this time was becoming increasingly frenzied and dominated by the on-going coal strike, the campaign for the disestablishment of the Welsh church, Irish home rule, and the Suffragette campaign, all of which tended to block any legislation on land issues. The appointment of Walter Runciman as President of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries during 1911 also disappointed land reformers within the Liberal Party, convinced that he was unlikely to act constructively. In his detailed diary, Ellis Davies recorded on 17 March 1912

54 Ibid., 11 March 1911, p. 8.

55 Ibid., 25 January 1912, p. 4.

56 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 6, diary entry for 14 March 1911.

57 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 7, diary entry for 6 December 1911.

58 See Ellis W. Davies, 'The Jury System', *Contemporary Review* no. 572 (August 1913), 210–15, an article penned following the publication of the report of the departmental committee.

59 John Grigg, *Lloyd George: from Peace to War, 1912–1916* (London, 1985), pp. 39–40.

60 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 19/12, David Jones, Pwllheli, to Davies, 2 February 1912.

his ‘conversation with Lloyd George as to land, urged him to establish Bank to advance money to tenants who are compelled to buy or lose their farms’,⁶¹ and there are subsequent references to further discussions between the two men. But Davies was dogged by health problems at this time which meant that he was unable to address outdoor public meetings.⁶²

Then, at the end of June, came the announcement that Ellis Davies had become a member of a new committee of experts set up by Lloyd George to evolve a revised Liberal land and housing policy. It was to be chaired by A. H. D. Acland, a former Liberal MP who had displayed an abiding interest in Welsh affairs and who had owned a property at Clynnog. Davies was to be specifically responsible for Welsh aspects and took little part in the English rural enquiry.⁶³ Within months, a succession of sittings had been held in north Wales. As Davies reported with gratification to Morgan Humphreys at the end of August, ‘Very busy these days with the Land Enquiry & am greatly surprised at the keen interest taken in the question even by well to do people – they seem most ready to help.’⁶⁴ On the last day of the year, 1912, Davies confided to his diary:

This closes another year – uneventful in a way but from a professional standpoint very successful as my business continues to increase. In politics I have done considerable work on the Committees on the land question, on Commons & on the Jury system. In the House itself I took considerable part on the Welsh Church Bill, but I find that my business & Parliamentary work added to my domestic anxieties are a great strain on my physical powers whilst I have often asked myself whether I am justified, by anything I can do in the public interest, in leaving my wife & little children. The boys in particular are asking why I go away and I am sorely tempted to ask the same question. My leaning is like my father’s to homefelt pleasures and to gentle scenes. Society has no charm for me, and the dreary dullness of the House deadens me at times.⁶⁵

In the following January Haydn Jones wrote to him,

Your friend the Chancellor really ought to do something for you at once. You have put in such an amount of work on the Land Committee that no one else can have put. It will come. Cheer up, old chap. Then I’ll bask in the sunshine of my friend’s greatness!⁶⁶

61 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 7, diary entry for 11 March 1912.

62 Ibid., diary note for June 1912; NLW, E. T. John Papers 362, John to James Edwards, Bwlchgwyn, 27 April 1912 (copy).

63 *The Times*, 29 June 1912, p. 7; Packer, op. cit., pp. 83–85, is excellent on this committee. For Ellis Davies’s views at this time, see Ellis W. Davies, ‘The Break-up of Landed Estates’, *Contemporary Review* no. 559 (July 1912), 49–56.

64 NLW, E. Morgan Humphreys Papers A/146, Ellis Davies to Humphreys, 31 August 1912 (‘Private’).

65 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 7, diary entry for 31 December 1912.

66 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 21/3, H. Haydn Jones to Davies, 30 January 1913 (‘Private’).

In August 1913, Davies was invited to be one of a deputation to the Prime Minister to discuss the subject of crown and common lands, but, to his dismay, he discovered that ‘most of the speeches were ineffective’.⁶⁷ When the Land Committee’s preliminary report was finally issued in the autumn, it recommended the establishment of land courts and the fixing of a minimum wage for agricultural labourers. The hope was expressed that the government might soon embody these proposals in legislation, thus making the tenant farmer much more independent. Striking disclosures were made concerning the living conditions of large numbers of agricultural labourers, especially those residing on farm premises. Many lived under the threat of imminent dismissal and they were then often forced to migrate to the larger towns and cities, causing severe over-crowding. It was anticipated that Lloyd George would soon deliver a major land speech at Pwllheli.⁶⁸ As the year ran its course, there were recurrent rumours that a general election might well now be imminent.⁶⁹ ‘How are the Welsh farmers taking the new proposals?’, asked a rather nervous Chancellor of the Exchequer to Ellis Davies who himself delivered several public speeches on the land question.⁷⁰

By 1914, Davies was claiming that a markedly new phase had been instituted, far removed from the now dated diagnosis of the long-suffering Welsh Land Commissioners way back in 1896. The early twentieth century, he insisted, had witnessed a remarkable improvement in life in the Welsh countryside. By now there was little difference in the average size of agricultural holdings in Wales from those in England, while the old notions of a land court and a judicially-fixed rental now lacked relevance as the land was viewed, first and foremost, as a productive enterprise.⁷¹

Early in the new year of 1914, Ellis Davies made powerful representations to the Local Government Board concerning the distress prevalent in the Nantlle and Penmachno districts, hardship born of escalating unemployment, and he sought financial support from government departments. He met with but scant success.⁷² He was re-elected joint-secretary of the Welsh Parliamentary Party the following month, and there was speculation that ministerial office was imminent, possibly at the Local Government Board, the Board of Trade, or the India Office, as the publication of the second volume of the Land Committee’s report was now expected

67 Ibid. 21/15, J. T. Roberts, clerk to the Carnarvon County Council, County Offices, Carnarvon, to Davies, 2 August 1913; *ibid.* 7, diary entry for 6 August 1913; *The Times*, 7 August 1913; NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 21/17, Eric Drummond, 11 Downing Street to Davies, 8 August 1913.

68 See the report in the *Manchester Guardian*, 23 October 1913

69 *Ibid.*

70 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 21/35, D. Lloyd George to Davies, 14 November 1913; *Y Dinesydd Cymreig*, 9 Rhagfyr 1913, for a recent speech by Ellis Davies at Cwmyglo.

71 *Wales*, March 1914, pp. 202–4.

72 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 22/3, John Burns, the Local Government Board, Whitehall to Davies, 23 January 1914; *ibid.* 22/3, Walter T. Jerred, assistant secretary to the Local Government Board, to the clerk to the Carnarvonshire County Council, 23 January 1914 (copy).

soon, with, it was hoped, specific and separate proposals for Wales.⁷³ In March, Lloyd George received Davies as part of a deputation of farmers who owned their farms to discuss issues such as the minimum wage and the government's land proposals.⁷⁴ The following month, it was Ellis Davies, supported by Haydn Jones and William Jones, his political near neighbours in north Wales, who introduced in the House of Commons a bill to secure a minimum wage and regular weekly wage for employees in the slate quarries and slate mines.⁷⁵

Predictably, Ellis Davies, like so many conviction Liberals, looked askance at the outbreak of 'total war' in August 1914 as it inevitably denoted the long-term lapsing of the traditional Welsh radical programme, especially the disestablishment of the Welsh church, and a more general threat to the Liberal ethos. 'This war is playing havoc with *Y Goleuad* and all similar papers,' lamented Morgan Humphreys as he invited Davies to contribute articles for publication in the journal.⁷⁶ In particular, the introduction in the House of Lords on 9 March 1915 of the Welsh Church Postponement Bill, designed to delay the implementation of the Welsh Disestablishment Act of 1914 until six months after the conclusion of hostilities, vexed Davies enormously. A notable grievance was that the Welsh MPs had not even been consulted on the matter, and Ellis Davies was one of their number who vehemently assailed the measure when it came up for debate in the Commons on 15 March.⁷⁷

Lloyd George's heroic attempts to urge his parliamentary colleagues to 'push aside sectarian controversy' in the interests of national unity, when nonconformists and Anglicans were dying side-by-side in the trenches, were but coolly received.⁷⁸ But Davies's personal standing at Westminster was increasing. When William Jones (Arfon), the Welsh Liberal whip, died in May 1915, Davies was at once mentioned as a likely candidate to fill the vacancy in the Government Whips' Office and was indeed appointed to the position.⁷⁹

In June 1915, Lloyd George was appointed Minister of Munitions by Asquith and he assumed control of the War Office a little over a year later. Among those who breakfasted with him at the National Liberal Club on 26 July 1916 was Ellis W. Davies who urged Lloyd George to press for a negotiated peace settlement with Germany 'on terms [...] Why not try to make peace now?' Davies cogently

73 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 7, diary entry for 10 February 1914; *ibid.* 22/5, William Eames to Davies, [? February 1914].

74 *Ibid.* 22/16, F. S. Stevenson to Davies, 21 March 1914.

75 *Ibid.* 22/23, R. T. Jones, North Wales Quarrymen's Union, to John Burns, President of the Board of Trade, 21 April 1914.

76 *Ibid.* 22/47, E. Morgan Humphreys, *Y Goleuad*, to Davies, 3 September 1914. For Davies's views at this juncture, see Ellis W. Davies, 'Yr Eglwysi a Chwestiynau Cymdeithasol', *The Grail*, 7.4 (1914), 57–9. This publication was the magazine of the Calvinistic Theological College, Aberystwyth.

77 *House of Commons Debates*, 5th series, vol. LXX, cc. 1782ff (15 March 1915). See also Ellis W. Davies, 'Achosion y Rhyfel', *Y Beirniad* (Gwanwyn, 1915), 1–7, written in response to a plea from John Morris-Jones for a contribution to the journal.

78 *House of Commons Debates*, 5th series, vol. LXX, c. 1818 (15 March 1915). See also NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 23/11, Charles Trevelyan to Davies, 26 March 1915.

79 *The Times*, 11 May 1915, p. 9.

advocated a settlement based on a re-instatement of Belgium, the restoration of Alsace-Lorraine to France, and an undertaking that Russia would recognize an independent Poland. Lloyd George at once rejected Davies's arguments on the grounds that Germany had not as yet experienced 'a sickener of war' and he felt convinced that the hostilities could well continue at least into 1918 – 'He would fight against peace in present circumstances. He had no animosity against the Germans, but they must be convinced that they had no chance of success.'⁸⁰ There had also been further violent disagreements over the need to introduce military conscription the previous January. Ellis Davies was one of five Welsh MPs who had abstained on the first reading of the Conscription Bill in the House of Commons on 6 January, arguing that, while he was not opposed to compulsion on principle, he still hoped that the requisite number of men might yet be 'obtained under the group system'.⁸¹ But he had then, rather surprisingly, tamely voted with the government on the second reading of the measure only six days later – to the intense chagrin of anti-conscription zealots like E. T. John (Denbighshire East) and W. Llewelyn Williams (Carmarthen Boroughs).⁸²

Early in 1917, Ellis Davies avidly attended the meetings at London of the Speaker's Electoral Conference, and he later served on the Reconstruction Committee and the Conference on the House of Lords, concluding in relation to the last-named, 'I am fighting for a directly elected Chamber as the American Senate, but the scheme finds no strong support.'⁸³ He also delivered a succession of pungent public speeches. Generally he was highly critical of Lloyd George's coalition government, consistently pointing up the dire shortage of food supplies, the sudden calling up of farmers to the armed services (without adequate replacements), the lack of pasture land, the inadequate protection for tenant farmers – many in Anglesey had received notices to quit their holdings – and the official restrictions placed on the activities of the Board of Agriculture.⁸⁴ He favoured some nationalization and the restoration of Free Trade when peace came.⁸⁵

Towards the end of the year, he began to embrace avidly the concept of a League of Free Nations then advocated so zealously by his colleague Colonel David Davies MP (Montgomeryshire), and until recently Lloyd George's devoted private secretary.⁸⁶ Ellis Davies also continued to serve as joint secretary (with Sidney Robinson) to the Welsh Parliamentary Party, regarded as primarily 'a purely radical and Labour organisation', but a body which Conservative MPs attended and cast their votes on 'all matters of non-party interest'.⁸⁷ Throughout the year, he travelled regularly from Caernarfon to London to attend the sittings of the Commons and

80 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 7, diary entry for 26 July 1916.

81 *Manchester Guardian*, 10 January 1916.

82 *South Wales Daily News*, 7 and 13 January 1916; NLW MS 16354D (T. Huws Davies Papers), W. Llewelyn Williams to Davies, 16 January 1916; Ellis W. Davies, 'Cristnogaeth a Dinasyddiaeth', *Y Deyrnas* (Rhagfyr, 1916), 8–9.

83 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 8, diary entry for 25 December 1917.

84 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers, file 35, unidentified press cutting dated 7 February 1917.

85 *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 10 February 1917.

86 NLW, E. Morgan Humphreys Papers A/161, Ellis W. Davies to Humphreys, 11 November 1917 (written from Seebohm Rowntree's home at York).

87 *North Wales Chronicle*, 1 February 1918.

followed keenly the peace initiatives which ensued. There was persistent talk of the next general election, and much speculation about the political future of Welsh Liberal MPs like J. Herbert Lewis, W. Llewelyn Williams, Ellis Jones Ellis-Griffith and Samuel T. Evans.⁸⁸

When the war did come to an end in November 1918 and the so-called ‘coupon’ general election followed within just weeks, Ellis Davies stood as the independent (Asquithian) Liberal candidate for the new Caernarfonshire constituency. As one who had represented the now defunct Eifion constituency with some distinction for more than twelve years, local Asquithian sympathisers in the county were more than ready to nominate and support him. By now he was viewed in the county as a staunch, open opponent of Lloyd George. Although he certainly had his local backers, Davies was nothing like as personally influential within the county as was the imperious multi-millionaire coalowner David Davies, Llandinam, also a veteran of 1906, in Montgomeryshire and, to a rather lesser extent, local businessman and quarry-owner Henry Haydn Jones in neighbouring Merionethshire. Ellis Davies offered himself to the electors of Caernarfonshire as one who advocated ‘a drastic reform of our Land System’ and ‘a complete re-organisation of our Financial System’, which included the abolition of taxes on food and income tax on those earning less than £300 per annum. In relation to the conclusion of peace, he commented, ‘I know of no party which objected to the present Government remaining in power to complete the work. I cordially agree.’ He was opposed to imperial preference and to the imposition of a general tariff, and to any further re-consideration of the provisions of the Welsh Church Act, 1914. Davies’s other policies included ‘the Total Prohibition of the Drink Trade’, the extension to women of ‘all the legal rights and privileges enjoyed by men’, the improvement of housing conditions, and the provision of ‘financial assistance’ to ex-servicemen, ‘to help them to start life with a fair prospect of success’.⁸⁹

But Ellis Davies was clearly unacceptable as a Liberal candidate to Lloyd George and the coalition machine which gave the infamous ‘coupon’ as a sign of official endorsement to candidates of whom it approved. By this time, Davies was viewed locally as almost an arch-enemy of David Lloyd George, one who had accused the Prime Minister of ensuring that his two sons, Richard and Gwilym, had never reached the trenches during the course of the war. Lloyd George himself predictably threw his weight behind the candidature of Colonel C. E. Breese who, although an Anglican, a non-Welsh speaker and woefully lacking in practical political experience, was a popular Porthmadog solicitor whose father had first employed Lloyd George as a young solicitor for the company Breese, Jones and Casson way back in the 1880s. He was also a member of the Caernarfonshire County Council and had served in the army for three years. It was reported locally that Breese had been in attendance at a crucial meeting at 10 Downing Street on 12 November 1918, the very day following the signing of the Armistice, when the details of the perpetuation of the coalition government and official coalition

88 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 9, diary notes for 17 September 1918.

89 Election address of Ellis W. Davies, 25 November 1918. See also the *Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury*, 18 November 1918.

approval of likely candidates had been discussed.⁹⁰ Lloyd George actually sent a personal letter to the electorate of Caernarfonshire assuring them that Ellis Davies had opposed him consistently throughout the duration of the war.⁹¹ Although there was no formal electoral pact with local Conservatives, most Caernarfonshire Tories readily supported Colonel Breese against Ellis Davies.⁹² At the height of the ‘coupon’ general election campaign, a ‘special correspondent’ of the *Manchester Guardian*, in a column penned at Caernarfon and entitled ‘Liberals proscribed by the Premier’, of which there were allegedly five within Wales, wrote:

Mr Ellis Davies and the Premier

The charge against him [Ellis W. Davies] appears to be nothing less heinous than lese-majesté. Mr. Davies is a strong confident man, much in favour with the hillside farmer and the quarryman, and perhaps the last man in the world to veil his bonnet to Mr. Lloyd George or to any other native prophet. It is told of him that he once said that he would never think of giving the Prime Minister a job as his managing clerk. It is probably quite untrue, but it is on everybody’s lips in Carnarvonshire, and the Prime Minister himself must have heard of it.⁹³

A third aspirant also surfaced in the person of the Labour candidate R. T. Jones, a former Liberal (who had actually sought the Liberal nomination for Caernarfonshire in 1918) with a substantial local following as the general secretary of the North Wales Quarrymen’s Union.

Throughout the keenly contested 1918 general election campaign, Ellis Davies criticized harshly the heavy preponderance of the Conservative majority within the so-called coalition government. He advocated consistently the traditional tenets of the Liberal faith including free trade, the abolition of conscription, temperance legislation, and far-reaching land reforms. Such objectives, he insisted, were unlikely to be pursued by a coalition government ‘dominated by brewers, capitalists and landlords’.⁹⁴ The question of conscription stubbornly refused to lie down in the face of repeated conjecture that the release of many ex-servicemen was but temporary, pending their dispatch to serve in post-revolutionary Russia. Such rumours led to real alarm in the north Wales constituencies.

Indeed, Ellis Davies’s supporters genuinely hoped that the impassioned cry of ‘No conscription!’ might well seal his re-election to parliament.⁹⁵ W. Llewelyn Williams, a political soul-mate of Davies’s, himself now bravely entering the

90 Ibid. On Breese’s nomination see the *North Wales Chronicle*, 4 October 1918.

91 See ‘Ellis Davies and the Cloven Hoof’, *North Wales Chronicle*, 29 November 1918.

92 *Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury*, 12 December 1918.

93 *Manchester Guardian*, 2 December 1918. Within a single day, Davies had written to defend himself, ‘I must write to say that it is a malicious invention, and that no statement made by me could but by malice be so distorted’ (ibid., 3 December 1918).

94 *Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury*, 26 November 1918.

95 NLW, E. Morgan Humphreys Papers A/3014, J. Bryn Roberts to Humphreys, 6 December 1918 (‘Private’).

political wilderness without a constituency to fight in 1918, wrote to him loyally at the height of the election campaign:

It is with sincere regret that I write to say I cannot possibly be with you at Bethesda next Friday night. It would have given me unfeigned pleasure to testify to your worth & services as Member of Parliament, from personal observation & experience, during the last 12½ years. No Welsh member has worked harder & in a more unostentatious way than you in the interests of Wales. During the War you have been uniformly – I have thought sometimes too uniformly – loyal in your support of the Government of the day. You have done nothing, either by speech or vote, to embarrass either this or any previous Government. And yet, after having been selected by the Caernarvonshire Lib. Assn. as its official candidate, the Prime Minister insists that you should be driven out of public life, because forsooth you have been a ‘bitter critic’ of his! No other charge can be brought against you. You have never betrayed Liberalism, never been untrue to Wales, never obstructed the prosecution of the War. But you have refused to join the crew of sycophants & place-hunters that surround the Prime Minister, or to become one of the Herodian clique which cries out at every word that falls from his infallible lips, ‘It is the voice of a God.’ I trust you will win a resounding victory at the polls, which will demonstrate that Wales is not a Birmingham, & which will add a ‘critic’ to the lied Parliament which will meet in January. Bethesda once fought a gallant fight against one autocrat [Lord Penrhyn]; I believe the sturdy quarrymen will support one of themselves against the new Autocrat [D. Lloyd George].

Pob llwydd! [Every success]
W. Llewelyn Williams

Gwnewch ddefnydd a fynnoch o hwn. [Make whatever use you like of this letter].⁹⁶

Williams rejoiced heartily that the well-known publicist and journalist Austen Harrison was to stand as an independent ‘League of Nations’ candidate in the Caernarfon Boroughs, thus denying the Prime Minister the luxury of an unopposed return to parliament.⁹⁷

But the optimism of Bryn Roberts and Llewelyn Williams was wholly misplaced. The December 1918 general election campaign in Wales soon degenerated into an ostentatious ‘ceremony of congratulation’, a national outpouring of gratitude to ‘the man who won the war’. Old-school Asquithian Liberals like Ellis W. Davies,

96 NLW, Ellis W. Davies Papers 25/18, W. Llewelyn Williams to Davies, 1 December 1918.

97 NLW, E. Morgan Humphreys Papers A/3709, W. Llewelyn Williams to Humphreys, 26 November 1918. For reflections of the 1918 general election campaign in the Caernarfon Boroughs constituency, see E. Morgan Humphreys, *Gwŷr Enwog Gynt* (Aberystwyth, 1953), pp. 62–5.

E. T. John in Denbighshire, and Reginald McKenna at Pontypool were rather hysterically reviled as unpatriotic traitors, ever potentially disloyal to the British state. Predictably, all suffered major electoral defeats. In Caernarfonshire, Ellis Davies was at the bottom of the poll, while Colonel Breese easily romped to victory. The fact that ‘quarrymen’s champion’ R. T. Jones polled no fewer than 8145 votes (34.6 per cent), far ahead of Ellis Davies’s 4937 (20.9 per cent), caused surprised reflections on the apparent role of the war in moulding political allegiances in Wales even in such a traditionally Liberal county.⁹⁸ Davies’s enemies could readily accuse him of insincerity and political inconstancy. When adopted as candidate, he had praised fulsomely the Prime Minister, endorsed the coalition Liberal election programme, and sworn allegiance to him. But in subsequent election speeches, it was alleged, he had venomously assailed Lloyd George, readily suggesting that, ‘Mr Lloyd George’s party was to consist of bishops, brewers, capitalists and land owners, and all those who were out for office and honours.’⁹⁹

During the lifetime of the post-war coalition government there was considerable speculation concerning Ellis Davies’s future political career. At the time of his ignominious defeat at Denbighshire in December 1918, he was still only forty-seven years of age. He returned to the limelight as president of the Welsh Liberal Federation, an Asquithian organization established in January 1921, and was requested to oppose Colonel C. E. Breese at Caernarfonshire in the general election of November 1922. He adamantly refused, but later returned to the Commons as the Liberal MP for Denbighshire from 1923 until his retirement, mainly on grounds of ill-health, in May 1929. This theme has already been examined by the present author in a previous article elsewhere.¹⁰⁰ Again he served assiduously and with commitment on Lloyd George’s rural land committee set up in June 1923, but met considerable unpopularity in his constituency because of his advocacy of radical land proposals on the lines of *The Land and the Nation*, the infamous ‘Green Book’ published in October 1925. Following his retirement from parliament, Davies remained active in local politics and in the affairs of the Presbyterian Church of Wales, until in a shock move he joined the Labour Party in May 1934 where he remained for the next five years, and he also displayed some sympathy for the ideals of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru set up back in August 1925. His nationalistic viewpoints earned the respect of party president J. Saunders Lewis. Throughout these years, Ellis Davies remained seriously interested in social reforms and generally lent support to Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement policy. He died at Caernarfon, where he had continued to live throughout, on 29 April 1939.

It was rather ironic that such an able man and a natural politician by temperament and experience should have experienced much disappointment and indeed frustration throughout his life and career. He received neither the offer of ministerial office nor an honour from the state of any kind. By the time he had returned to parliament in 1923, the Liberals had become very much the third party

98 *North Wales Chronicle*, 3 January 1919.

99 *Carnarvon and Denbigh Herald*, 5 January 1919.

100 See J. Graham Jones, ‘Ellis Davies MP and Denbighshire Politics, 1923–9’, *Denbighshire Historical Society Transactions*, 59 (2011), 207–41.

in the state, to be reduced still further to an embarrassing rump of just forty elected MPs in 1924, and experiencing only a minor revival in 1929 despite an impassioned, informed, well-funded general election campaign. Throughout his long political career – as the representative for both Eifion and Denbighshire – Davies was highly regarded for his loyalty and dedication to his constituents, his unfailing, robust independence of outlook, his sterling service on several parliamentary committees, and his dedication to the British state as an institution.

Ellis Davies certainly worked hard and diligently in many spheres throughout his life. His political activity was always based on firm and single-minded radicalism. He had an alert, receptive, and discerning mind, an independent power of judgement, and a compelling power of conviction on his many appreciative readers and his audiences. He read extensively throughout his life and was endowed with an exceptionally retentive memory. He contributed articles on politics, politicians, and history to several Welsh newspapers and periodicals; these publications readily testify to the breadth of his interests and the sureness of his thinking.