

E. T. JOHN AND THE POLITICS OF BRECON AND RADNOR, 1920–1924

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Abstract

E. T. John, a native of Pontypridd, spent more than thirty years pursuing a career as a Middlesbrough ironmaster before having a second career as the Liberal MP for the Denbighshire East constituency from December 1910 until 1918 and introducing an abortive measure, the Government of Wales Bill, in the House of Commons in March 1914. Having rather dramatically defected to the Labour Party at the end of the war and facing defeat in his constituency, John stood as his new party's parliamentary candidate for the Brecon and Radnor division in the general elections of 1922 and 1924 and in the Anglesey by-election of April 1923. Although defeated on all three occasions, his powerful campaigns in the counties, which embodied a new kind of nationalistic Welsh Labour politics, made a considerable impact locally. The main purpose of this article is to examine and elucidate the two election campaigns at Brecon and Radnor and their significance.

Edward Thomas John (1857–1931), the well-known ironmaster and pioneering Welsh nationalist, was born at Pontypridd on 14 March 1857, the son of John John, an anchor smith, and his wife, Margaret (née Morgan).¹ He attended the local Wesleyan day school. But early in his life he moved to Middlesbrough, on the south bank of the Tees in north Yorkshire, where, along with many other Welshmen at the time, he worked in the iron and steel industry. And his progress there was really quite dramatic: he rose from junior clerk in the firm of Bolckow, Vaughan & Co., ironmasters (a firm originally founded by another Welshman, William Edwards) to become a director. And eventually he became director also of several mining concerns and managing director of a local iron and steel company. In 1881 he married Margaret Rees of Pendeulwyn, Glamorgan, and their eldest son was named Idris Owen John.

A Welsh-speaking Calvinistic Methodist, E. T. John became a leading figure in the religious and cultural life of the Teesside Welsh, notably in the Cleveland and Durham Welsh National Society, and a patron of their chapels. He also developed strong political interests while in Middlesbrough, notably in education and church issues.² In January 1910, by then in his early fifties, he retired from industry to

- 1 See Kenneth O. Morgan, 'John, Edward Thomas (1857–1931)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn <<http://www.oxforddnb.com>> [accessed 12 September 2016].
- 2 See E. T. John, 'Edmund Burke and the Irish Question', *Cymru Fydd*, 2.11 (November 1889), 608–18.

forge a totally different career, becoming the Liberal MP for the East Denbighshire division. During the summer of 1910, with the country immersed in the conflict between the Liberal government and the House of Lords over the furor following Lloyd George's 1909 'People's Budget', he rose from political obscurity to promote the issue of Welsh home rule, a cause which had been conspicuously dormant since the collapse of Lloyd George's Cymru Fydd (Young Wales) League in 1896.³

In what one historian has optimistically described as the beginning of the 'Second Welsh Home Rule Movement',⁴ E. T. John wrote an important letter to the *Manchester Guardian* on 8 August 1910 pressing the case for a measure of federal home rule as a solution to the pressing Irish question. He then embarked on a highly personal campaign of public lectures, political pamphlets and letters and articles in the Welsh press. He also established links with the Scottish National Committee and had private meetings with the Chancellor Lloyd George himself in an attempt to persuade him to involve himself again in the movement for Welsh self-government. The keynote of John's campaign was a spirited and earnest attempt to provide an essentially economic blueprint for Welsh self-government, far removed from the cultural romanticism of previous nationalistic campaigns: 'The claims of national sentiment must be materially reinforced by considerations of national interest and popular well-being.'⁵ He was also prominent in the Welsh National League movement, formed early in 1911. John now embarked on a lengthy campaign of pamphleteering and speaking in favour of home rule. And in February 1914 he personally introduced in the House of Commons a pioneering Government of Wales Bill, a private member's measure, based closely on the Government of Ireland Bill, 1912, which called for a directly elected Welsh Parliament of no fewer than 90 members and possessing both legislative and tax-raising powers. The measure won the support of just eleven of John's parliamentary colleagues in the House of Commons, nine of these MPs representing Welsh constituencies and two from Scotland. But the bill's second reading, scheduled for 24 March, predictably never materialized, and it proceeded no further than a nominal first reading in the House. Linguistic patriots were quick to point out that John's abortive measure, although sincere in its intentions, made no provision whatsoever for the granting of official status to the Welsh language, an issue which became of major concern to the activists of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru after 1925.⁶

However, the issue of separatism attracted scant interest in Wales at the time, where church disestablishment still remained in any case the dominant political theme of the day, while E. J. John himself was a dull and uncharismatic speaker and, although earnest and sincere in his advocacy, was totally lacking in charisma and any kind of mass popular appeal. He himself was convinced that the major questions with which an embryonic Welsh parliament would be faced were

3 J. Graham Jones, 'E. T. John and Welsh Home Rule, 1910–1914', *Welsh History Review*, 13.4 (December 1987), 453–67.

4 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics, 1868–1922*, 4th edn (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), p. 255.

5 E. T. John, *Home Rule for Wales: Addresses to Young Wales* (London: n. pub., 1912), p. 17.

6 See W. Ambrose Bebb, 'The Welsh Home Rule Bill', *The Welsh Outlook*, May 1919, p. 136.

reform of the education system and temperance legislation.⁷ He was apparently largely oblivious to the manifold tensions and passions aflame in the south Wales coalfield during the years immediately preceding the First World War and the many difficulties besetting the rural areas throughout Wales. Predictably, however, the issue made no further headway until after the war.

Significantly, John was the only Welsh Liberal MP to vote against both readings of the highly contentious and divisive Conscription Bill in 1916.⁸ And he was strongly and increasingly pro-Asquithian in his political outlook as the war ran its course, especially after Lloyd George had been appointed to the Ministry of Munitions in June 1915, and later as the Armistice, to be followed by the inevitable general election, approached. During the war years a new journal, *The Welsh Outlook*, the brainchild of Dr. Thomas Jones CH and Colonel David Davies MP, Llandinam, was engaged in a spirited attempt to bring Welsh issues back into the forefront of political debate. Here E. T. John published an impressive series of articles during 1918 on the subject 'Wales: its Politics and Economics', a real effort to secure a measure of popular consensus as to the nature of Welsh concerns in the new post-war world.⁹ And in 1919 this series of trenchant articles was to be re-published as a booklet by the Welsh Outlook Press of Newtown.¹⁰

By the time of the 1918 poll, John had experienced something of a dramatic political conversion from Liberalism to Labour, and he was quick to advocate the setting up of a Welsh Nationalist Labour Party. He formally joined the Labour Party in the autumn of 1918, since that party was apparently sympathetic to devolution, and John also greatly admired its internationalism and backing for a League of Nations. Even so, he still had his doubts, commenting bitterly that his new party was making 'an exceedingly poor show in Parliament'.¹¹ In fact it was John who stood as the Labour candidate, with full party support, for the new, reunited Denbighshire division in the 'coupon' general election of December 1918 against the Coalition Liberal Sir D. S. Davies. The initiative in his selection and nomination had been taken by the Denbighshire Trades and Labour Council, and it was the local Agricultural Labourers Union which proved especially active in his campaign in the county. The original choice in the county had been a prominent Socialist the Revd. J. H. Howard, a notable champion of the rural underdog.¹² But E. T. John, who had recently sought the Labour nomination for the neighbouring Wrexham division, was the chosen candidate for Denbighshire, initially at least as 'a Welsh nationalist with Labour leanings',¹³ and local voters were reminded

7 Edward T. John, 'Beth fydd Cymru dan senedd Gymreig', *Y Geninen*, 29.2 (Ebrill 1911), 73–75.

8 Morgan, *Wales in British Politics*, p. 277 fn.

9 John's series of articles entitled 'Wales: its Politics and Economics' was published in the *Welsh Outlook*, 5, no. 1 (January 1918), 13–15; no. 2 (February 1918), 53–56; no. 3 (March 1918), 91–94; no. 4 (April 1918), 120–22; no. 5 (May 1918), 153–55; no. 6 (June 1918), 186–88; no. 7 (July 1918), 221–24; and no. 8 (August 1918), 247–51.

10 E. T. John, *Wales: its Politics and Economics* (Cardiff: Welsh Outlook Press, 1919).

11 Cited in Michael Kinnear, *The Fall of Lloyd George: The Political Crisis of 1922* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1973), p. 32.

12 *Flintshire Observer*, 5 December 1918.

13 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 2 December 1918.

of his staunch support in the House of Commons for a minimum weekly wage of 30 shillings for all agricultural labourers.¹⁴ Inevitably, like several other pacifist candidates in Wales and beyond, he languished at the foot of the poll, winning just 2958 votes, 16.7 per cent of the total poll. But he had certainly made a positive impression in Welsh Labour circles.¹⁵ He remained strongly opposed to the setting up of an independent Welsh nationalist party and remained convinced that, ‘There is no alternative but to induce all sincere Welsh Nationalists to join the Labour Party’.¹⁶

In the post-war years John continued to campaign strongly for federal home rule; he was convinced that the success of the nationalist struggle in Ireland and the recognition of the principle of nationality in the Treaty of Versailles made Welsh self-government more likely. Along with his close associate, the journalist Beriah Gwynfe Evans, he lent support to various initiatives from 1919 onwards. In 1921, Y Gymdeithas Genedlaethol Gymreig (‘The Welsh National Society’, generally known as ‘Y Tair G’) was formed at the University College of North Wales, Bangor, and John was chosen its honorary president and became actively involved.¹⁷ And he was soon invited to stand as a parliamentary candidate in several Welsh divisions during subsequent years, including Anglesey where he was resident. In the high summer of 1920 an approach came from Pembrokeshire where the Labour Party was laying down roots at this time with no fewer than twenty-four accredited branches of the National Union of Agricultural Workers affiliated to the party.¹⁸

Then, at a meeting of the newly established Brecknock and Radnor Divisional Labour Party (DLP) convened at Brecon on 9 October 1920, the decision was taken to contest the seat at the next general election and to provide every Labour organization in the division with an opportunity to participate in the selection of a prospective Labour candidate. Two nominations then came to hand – Edward Thomas John of Llanidan Hall, Llanfair PG in Anglesey, and George Barker, the SWMF agent for Abertillery. Barker, however, had no wish at that time to depart from his current role,¹⁹ but John agreed to accept the nomination, concluding his letter of acceptance thus, ‘I need not add that I am impelled to thus renew my participation in the political life of Wales by the conviction that the continuance in office of the present administration is an exceedingly serious menace to the peace and prosperity both of Europe and the United Kingdom. Unhappily the leaders of the Coalition perceive maximum political profit in the existing unsettlement in Ireland, and today in the disturbed condition of industrial affairs in Great Britain.

14 *Y Dinesydd Cymreig*, 11 Rhagfyr 1918.

15 See E. T. John, ‘Wales and its Programme’, *The Welsh Outlook*, 6.3 (March 1919), 57–59.

16 National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), E. T. John Papers 2057, John to ‘Mr Howard’, 2 January 1919 (copy).

17 J. E. Jones, *Tros Gymru: J. E. a'r Blaid* (Caerdydd: Gwasg John Penry, 1970), p. 25; NLW, E. T. John Papers 3030, E. T. John to Moses Griffith, 12 December 1921 (copy).

18 NLW, E. T. John Papers 2628 and 2641, D. T. Lewis to John, 23 July and 2 August 1920; D. A. Pretty, *The Rural Revolt that Failed: Farm Workers' Trade Unions in Wales, 1889–1950* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989), p. 142.

19 Just weeks later, however, Barker agreed to stand as the Labour candidate in a by-election at Abertillery – held on 21 December 1920 – possibly because this was much more promising territory for the party, and he easily captured the seat.

The presence of the Government is in each case the gravest obstacle to early and abiding peace.²⁰ The essential point was made at once that John was prepared to pay the whole of his own election expenses, so that only relatively modest incidental costs would need to be met by the local DLP.²¹ John's readiness to offset his election expenses was indeed considered crucial, precipitating barbed comments in the local press that he had been selected as 'Welsh Nationalist candidate' primarily because he was clearly 'expected to relieve the party of all anxiety about election expenses'.²² On the last day of the year, the new candidate spelled out his convictions with some force:

There are personal considerations tending powerfully to deter me from seeking to re-enter Welsh political life, but the lamentable posture of affairs at home and abroad renders it exceedingly difficult for men of public spirit to remain neutral and inactive. The widespread unemployment, so largely the direct and inevitable outcome of the Punic Peace of Versailles and the subsequent strategy of the French and British Governments, the deplorable state of Ireland, so clearly the result of Coalitionist methods, the colossal expenditure with its disastrous reaction upon industry, and the utter failure of the Government to initiate any scheme of general disarmament, make an early change of rulers here in Great Britain imperative [...] Conceived, however, in corruption – the offspring of an unholy alliance of recreant of recreant Radicalism and calculating Conservatism, subsisting daily and hourly upon the subordination and sacrifice of principle to the imperious instinct of self-preservation, it staggers blindly forward to the richly deserved doom of early demise and ignominious interment [...] It surely is the business of the Labour Party to discover means of forcing an instant dissolution [...] In Wales, as in Ireland, the Labour Party is Nationalist as well as National, and will exert itself to the utmost to secure simultaneously for the Principality precisely the same generous meed of national self-government as seems likely to be achieved shortly by Ireland, with some close approach to general consent. Wales, controlling its own destinies, will quickly eliminate poverty and accomplish the economic as well as the political emancipation of its people.²³

It would seem that, by this time, he had come round to the conclusion that the semi-industrialized Brecon and Radnor division now offered a much better prospect of electoral success for the Labour Party than either Anglesey or Pembrokeshire.²⁴ The party had become well established in the division's southern fringe, which was

20 NLW, E. T. John Papers 5398, circular from S. G. Davies, General Secretary of the Brecknock-Radnor DLP, [October 1920].

21 Ibid.

22 *Brecon County Times*, 11 August 1921.

23 NLW, E. T. John Papers 2794, E. T. John to S. G. Davies, 31 December 1921.

24 Ibid. 2709, Illyd Morgan to Beriah Gwynfe Evans, 12 October 1920 (copy).

heavily industrialized, and, as a result of the propaganda of the National Union of Railwaymen, the National Union of Agricultural Workers and the Workers' Union, had some support in the rural areas too.²⁵ Once he had gained the county nomination, E. T. John began to woo the constituency with vigour and conviction from the beginning of 1921.²⁶ Labour activists in the division were convinced of the importance of the agricultural vote locally and saw as vital the necessity to 'capture the agricultural labourer'.²⁷ And it was the candidate's fervent hope that popular displeasure occasioned by wage reductions in the agricultural industry might well bring local support for his campaign.²⁸ In his heart of hearts, John regarded his candidature there as 'in every way an arduous undertaking, though by no means hopeless'.²⁹ The uncertainty was increased by the fact that the double county constituency had come into existence only a few years earlier in 1918 and that no Labour candidate had stood there in the 'coupon' general election of that year or indeed in either the old Brecknock or Radnor divisions before then.

Members of the teaching profession in the constituency were strongly urged to throw their weight behind the new Labour candidate:

I ask you to accord to Mr John's candidature your influence and support in order to maintain your own standard of life, to safeguard the educational interests of the children of the country, and to obviate the tragedy of 40,000 teachers being thrown out of employment. There is no doubt this present Government, if returned to power once again, will ruthlessly apply to Teachers and our Educational system the recommendations of the Geddes Commission. By increasing the size of classes, your work will become more onerous and less effective, thus causing irreparable harm to the rising generation [...] Mr John was for many years actively associated with the control of primary, secondary and technical education in the North of England, and while actively representing East Denbighshire actively exerted himself to bring about the creation of a National Council of Education for Wales.³⁰

And during these crucial months, as E. T. John pursued vigorously his candidature in the Brecon and Radnor division, he continued to be an ardent advocate of home rule for Wales, a commitment intensified and indeed radicalized by the recent creation of the Irish Free State. He was also insistent that Wales should be an independent member of the League of Nations.³¹ At this time there were ripples of interest in a reawakened Welsh nationalism. The Speaker's Conference,

25 Pretty, *The Rural Revolt that Failed*, pp. 166–67.

26 NLW, E. T. John Papers 2768, D. S. Davies to John, 18 December 1920.

27 Ibid. 3080, B. G. Evans to John, 20 February 1922.

28 Ibid. 3082, John to B. G. Evans, 21 February 1922 (copy).

29 Ibid. 2813, John to L. MacBean, 25 February 1921 (copy).

30 Ibid. 5398, Rees Thomas, Lochaber, Builth Wells, President of the Brecknock and Radnor Labour Party, to 'fellow teachers of Brecon and Radnor', February 1922.

31 Edward T. John, 'Cyfle Cymru Heddiw', *Y Geninen* (Gorffennaf 1922), pp. 121–23.

which considered sympathetically a federal Britain, had reported back in 1919. Sir Robert J. Thomas, the Liberal MP for Wrexham, introduced a Government of Wales Bill in the Commons in 1922. And there ensued several national conferences at Llandrindod Wells and other venues in support of the home rule cause. Indeed John saw himself at this crucial time as, in the words of Beriah Evans, the potential ‘de Valera of Wales’.³²

But, as the local campaign got into its stride during 1922, E. T. John became ever more aware that, in the north of the new constituency in particular, the county of Radnorshire, which was almost entirely rural and agricultural in character, there existed ‘some very difficult places to work and difficult people to deal with’.³³ The first ever Labour Party public meeting in the history of Radnorshire was held at Rhayader in the autumn of 1921.³⁴ There was some resentment in Radnorshire that the county had lost its own MP as a result of the redistribution which followed the passage of the Representation of the People Act of 1918. At a stroke the area had been deprived of both its own county member and also its borough member.³⁵ Difficulties were compounded by the meagre financial resources of the local DLP and the consequent inability to appoint a full-time Labour Party agent or to set up a central party office for the division, a major weakness given the sheer geographical size of the constituency.³⁶ The industrial town of Brynmawr was just about the only staunchly Socialist stronghold in the whole of the division.

John’s sole opponent in 1922 proved to be W. A. Jenkins who stood formally as a Coalition Liberal but who labelled himself a rather neutral ‘business candidate’, and one whose extensive business interests locally – he was the chairman of William Jenkins and Co. and the director of several other companies – thus ensured him much ready Conservative support.³⁷ And, when the executive committee of the Brecon and Radnor Liberal Association met on 26 October, ‘it unanimously endorsed the attitude of Mr W. A. Jenkins [...] and there was a feeling that every effort should be made to co-operate with Unionists’.³⁸ The divisional Unionist and Conservative Association voted to ‘give its wholehearted support to the candidature of Mr W. A. Jenkins (National Liberal candidate)’.³⁹ And the local press, strongly opposed to Socialism, described Jenkins as ‘an enthusiastic follower of the ex-Premier [David Lloyd George]. A whole-hearted Liberal, Mr Jenkins is also a strong believer, especially in the present critical juncture in our nation’s history, in the welding of the best of the leaders of the Liberal and Conservative parties for the purpose of carrying on the business of the country and for the re-establishment of peace and trade.’ And when Jenkins addressed a packed, enthusiastic meeting at

32 Cited in Kenneth O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government, 1918–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 165.

33 NLW, E. T. John Papers 3245, John to T. Rowley Jones, 5 May 1922 (copy).

34 *Labour Woman*, November 1921.

35 *South Wales Daily News*, 13 November 1922.

36 NLW, E. T. John Papers 3277, T. C. Morris to Iltyd Morgan, 15 May 1922 (copy); *ibid.* 3517, Howell Watkins, Abercrave, to John, 12 August 1922.

37 *South Wales Daily News*, 6 and 13 November 1922. On Jenkins, see *Welsh Hustings, 1885–2004*, ed. by Ivor Thomas Rees (Llandybie: Gwasg Dinefwr, 2005), p. 149.

38 *South Wales Daily News*, 28 October 1922.

39 *Brecon and Radnor Express*, 2 November 1922.

Knighton in Radnorshire, it was given added weight by the fact that it was chaired by the distinguished figure of Sir Frank Edwards, the former Liberal MP for the county (1900–10) and now described as ‘one of Mr Lloyd George’s most loyal friends’ during the heyday of Cymru Fydd.⁴⁰ And a meeting of the Brecknock and Radnor Unionist and Conservative Association at Builth Wells, chaired by J. M. Gibson Watt, with Jenkins personally in attendance, resolved that it ‘should give its wholehearted support to the candidature of Mr W. A. Jenkins’. Jenkins assured them that, if elected, he would ‘give full support to Mr Bonar Law if he did not introduce and reactionary measures and, in reply to a direct question from the chairman, said he would oppose Mr Lloyd George if he coquetted with the Labour Party’.⁴¹

During August and September there had ensued a bitter personal clash between these two candidates, notably over their respective attitudes to Welsh home rule and the allegedly personal references made in their campaign speeches. And in due course the correspondence which passed between the two was published in the columns of the local press, and then re-printed as a pamphlet to be circulated throughout the division.⁴² As the local campaign warmed up, the Revd Gordon Lang of Monmouth, a prominent south Wales Socialist who participated extensively and to great effect in the local campaign in support of E. T. John, wrote privately of an encouraging revival in the Labour prospects there:

Let me at once say that there are ample signs of an awakening to Labour’s policy in the division. The spirit is better and more coherent than on my previous visits and there are more signs of organisation. I find unqualified appreciation of Mr John’s recent speeches in the division and the general impression, even amongst non-members, is that Mr John’s utterances have been dignified and on a very high plane. This is indeed valuable encouragement [...] Personally I feel much more sanguine of Mr John’s success than I have done previously and with a good effort and through political organisation the seat ought to be quite secure. The rural workers are obviously well with us, and at Presteigne, Knighton and Old Radnor – the latter in particular – we find unexpectedly hearty support. The railwaymen right through the division are most keen and will be a strong factor. I have talked to a number of friends who are not supporters of the Labour Party and their view is that Mr John is in every way a stronger candidate than Mr Jenkins and a large number of good Liberals will give him their support. By the way the correspondence in today’s *Western Mail* is first-rate propaganda. One of Mr Jenkins’s avowed supporters here told me

40 Ibid., 26 October 1922.

41 *Brecon and Radnor Express*, 2 November 1922; *Brecon County Times*, 2 November 1922.

42 NLW, E. T. John Papers 3587, Iltud Morgan to the *Brecon and Radnor Express*, 2 September 1922; *ibid.* 3608, Beriah Gwynfe Evans to John, 5 September 1922. See also the report on the matter in the *Western Mail*, 5 September 1922.

that Mr John had ‘smitten him hip and thigh’.⁴³

And, during the course of the campaign, veteran campaigner Beriah Gwynfe Evans, a close personal friend, wrote to John at some length, ‘I gather you are satisfied with developments in Brecon and Radnor. Jenkins made a terrible hash of both his Home Rule and his Labour faith, and showed up ridiculously in his newspaper controversy with you. While at Ammanford and Llandrindod I made a point of making careful enquiry – and was disappointed to find that there was a general impression you were relying too much upon your opponent’s personal ineptitude, and disregarded the power of the [Labour Party] machine. A word to the wise.’⁴⁴

Throughout the intense campaign E. T. John won the support of several south Wales MPs sponsored by the South Wales Miners’ Federation, among them George Barker, the recent victor in the Abertillery by-election in December 1920. It was agreed on all sides that John would poll solidly among the mining communities, where unemployment ran high as the depression began to bite, and other sections of organized Labour, but in rural Radnorshire, where the numbers of unemployed were creeping up too, rather fewer rallied to his banner.⁴⁵ It was estimated in press columns that, of the 25,000 electors likely to vote in the new electoral division, some 13,000 to 14,000 resided in the industrial areas.⁴⁶

The Labour candidate told the voters of Builth Wells that, if elected, he would ensure that the town would be designated a necessitous area for the purpose of securing government grants for much-needed road improvement and thus provide employment opportunities locally.⁴⁷ (The previous year the Coalition Government headed by Lloyd George had made available Treasury funding to assist local authorities in financing such employment projects.) And it was reported in the press that official unemployment was notably high at Brynmawr where, out of a total population of 9000, 2000 were out of work.⁴⁸ E. T. John was harsh in his attacks on the Coalition Government and on Lloyd George personally, attributing to them the current difficulties in trade and the poor relations with France, and he, as indeed did W. A. Jenkins, called for the urgent settlement of the pressing reparations issue.⁴⁹ The Labour campaign was indeed thrusting and impressive, but its impact was necessarily blighted by poor organization and a marked lack of resources in the rural areas. To a large extent, too, the local press was consistently hostile, warning the electors of the county that the implementation of Socialism would inevitably lead to the ‘wholesale seizure of private possessions’.⁵⁰ Both candidates discussed during the campaign issues such as temperance, Ireland, and Welsh devolution,

43 NLW, E. T. John Papers 3611, Revd Gordon Lang, ‘at Builth Wells’, to Illtyd Morgan, 5 September 1922.

44 Ibid. 3672, Beriah Gwynfe Evans to John, 7 October 1922.

45 *South Wales Daily News*, 13 November 1922.

46 *Brecon and Radnor Express*, 16 November 1922.

47 *Western Mail*, 11 November 1922.

48 *Llais Llafur (Labour Voice)*, 11 November 1922.

49 Ibid., 4 November 1922.

50 *Brecon and Radnor Express*, 15 November 1922.

still E. T. John's personal brainchild. Interestingly, W. A. Jenkins, delivering an impassioned peroration at Llanfihangel Tal-y-llyn at the beginning of October, gave detailed attention to John's personal views on devolution:

He was absolutely opposed at the present moment to the idea of Home Rule for Wales in a sense of complete separation from the Imperial Parliament. To set up a new Government in Wales with a new horde of officials and a new bureaucracy, with an enormously increased expenditure, was not wanted at the present time [*applause*]. He believed in a scheme of devolution under which matters closely affecting Wales could be dealt with on the spot, but the bigger scheme could be deferred to a more convenient season, whilst a measure of devolution could come at once [*applause*]. Such a scheme at present would deal with Welsh matters more expeditiously and save an immense amount of time and money. Home Rule for Wales was being pushed – he would not say by persons who had a bee in their bonnet for it, but with an obsession in which they were quite sincere, but at present it would only mean time and money [*applause*].⁵¹

Passions ran high as the campaign ran its course. The local right-wing press insisted that E. T. John's passport to the candidature was his considerable wealth – 'The question of where the money was to come from had to be faced [...] and the adoption of Mr John solved it.' It was readily recalled that pecuniary considerations had prevented the nomination of a Labour aspirant in the division back in 1918, thus permitting the Coalition Liberal Sidney Robinson the luxury of an unopposed return.⁵² At the end of the day, W. A. Jenkins polled 20,405 votes (67.4 per cent) and E. T. John 9,850 (32.6 per cent). It was clear at once that the northern polling stations of Radnorshire were 'solid' for W. A. Jenkins, but E. T. John was not especially despondent at the outcome, telling the local press 'that he was very well pleased with his progress in that county. He is also satisfied with his position at Brecon and Builth [...] and is very gratified with the large measure of help he has received from Nonconformist ministers. The mining districts he believes are giving him a practically solid vote.'⁵³ And in reply to a message of profound commiseration from his old ally Beriah Gwynfe Evans, the defeated candidate still remained fairly upbeat:

From the moment the Conservatives decided not to run a candidate of their own, it was obvious that Labour could not hope to win the seat on this occasion. We have, however, demonstrated that with the Press completely against us, with no organisation whatever outside of the industrial area, Labour has polled nearly 10,000 votes, practically one-third of the total poll [...] I am by no means

51 *Ibid.*, 4 October 1922.

52 *Brecon County Times*, 9 November 1922.

53 *Ibid.*, 16 November 1922.

discontent with the result as I always knew that 40% of the electorate of Brecon and Radnor was Conservative, and I had little hope that the Liberal element there would be sufficiently broad minded to ally themselves with the workers. *It was, however, very delightful to me to find that during the last two days almost the whole of the abler and younger Non-conformist ministers, from Professor Miall Edwards down, found their way on to my platform.*⁵⁴

Reflecting on the contest the following March, he returned to the same key point: ‘I must say that I was splendidly assisted by many of the religious leaders, including the Rev. J. H. Jenkins, the Rector of Cilrhedyn, Prof D. Miall Edwards, the Rev. Gordon Lang – a most brilliant exponent of the Labour gospel – Rev. F. C. White of Llandrindod and many others. I believe that the ministerial element ran to a score or possibly two dozen good men, and that the advocacy was throughout most inspiring and reached the loftiest plane.’⁵⁵

John observed the subsequent course of events at Westminster with great interest, appearing to applaud the election of J. Ramsay MacDonald, recently elected the Labour MP for the south Wales division of Aberavon – which had been represented by a Coalition Liberal MP from 1918 until 1922 – as the official Leader of His Majesty’s Opposition as well as the leader of the Labour Party.⁵⁶ He wrote warmly to MacDonald, ‘The Labour Party will now enjoy the advantage of broad minded, spirited and competent leadership,’ but continued, ‘You will, I am afraid, not be able to devote much time and thought to the specific needs of the Principality [...] Wales certainly deserves well of Labour seeing that it has not added to the hospitality it so long provided for Keir Hardie similar facilities to yourself and to [R.C.] Wallhead, [the ILP Member for Merthyr Tydfil], evidently at a time when English constituencies were regarded as less dependable.’⁵⁷ He delighted in the recent decision of the Labour MPs from Scotland to form a specific group and hoped that the Welsh Labour MPs would soon emulate their example.⁵⁸ John’s close associate, the Revd Gordon Lang of Monmouth, who had made a major contribution to the Labour campaign at Brecknock and Radnor, responded to his ally’s recent missive to Ramsay MacDonald, ‘Privately, I am a little doubtful if he will do very much for Welsh Nationalism. There is only one person who can do it with full understanding, and, too, with the full confidence of the Welsh people, and that person is yourself. You simply must be at St Stephens and I am by no means sure that you will not be there before long. It is quite evident that the old idea of the Trade Union Leader as the ideal Labour MP is dying fast, and we have not enough people like yourself to take their places.’⁵⁹ E. T. John and MacDonald had lunch

54 NLW, E. T. John Papers 3699, John to Beriah Gwynfe Evans, 20 November 1922 (copy). My emphasis.

55 Ibid. 3809, John to ‘Mr Davies’, 17 March 1923.

56 See C. Howard, ‘“The Focus of the Mute Hopes of a Whole Class”: Ramsay MacDonald and Aberavon, 1922–29’, *Llafur*, 7.1 (1996), 68–77.

57 NLW, E. T. John Papers 3705, John to J. Ramsay MacDonald, 22 November 1922 (copy).

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid. 3731, Gordon Lang to John, 2 December 1922.

together at Warwick Square a little later:

I found him, as he had previously expressed himself by letter, most anxious that I should join the Labour forces at St Stephens at the earliest possible date. He is, I think, more completely in accord with Welsh Nationalism than you appear to anticipate. He certainly expressed himself very strongly, and he is, I am sure, in no way given to dissimulation. The Labour Party has been most fortunate in its choice of Leader, and their gain in this respect will, I am confident, have the most beneficial effects, alike at home and abroad.⁶⁰

John also discussed with Morgan Jones, the recently elected Labour MP for Caerphilly and a committed, high-profile pacifist, the necessity of the Labour Party in Wales remaining true to Welsh causes,⁶¹ and he agreed with T. Huws Davies, editor of *The Welsh Outlook*, that the prestigious journal should in the near future carry a series of articles discussing various aspects of Welsh nationalism.⁶²

As these Socialists rather licked their wounds following the local outcome of the November 1922 general election in south Wales, the new MP for Brecon and Radnor, W. A. Jenkins, quickly found his feet at Westminster. Interestingly, he was one of ten Liberal MPs who defied the official party line and party leader H. H. Asquith by voting with the Conservatives in opposing the formation of the first minority Labour government in British history. And he voted with the Tories on several occasions during the 1923–24 Parliament.⁶³ He at once claimed to be totally appalled by the abysmal quality and unworthy demeanour of so many of the Labour MPs he now sat opposite on the green benches at Westminster:

Their irrelevant and frivolous remarks was enough to make one's blood boil. Indeed the conduct of some of them was not worthy of a parish council meeting, and, judging from the past week's experience, all he could say was 'God help the country if ever it gets into the hands of the Socialist Party'. He was of working class stock himself, and he was proud of it, but heaven help the country if it were ever ruled by those who called themselves the Labour Party today.⁶⁴

Jenkins regarded as essential the urgent necessity to re-unite the two, still feuding sections of the Liberal Party to form a credible and robust opposition to the government.⁶⁵ Within weeks he had sought an interview with the Chancellor

60 Ibid. 3756, John to Lang, 1 January 1923.

61 See Wayne David, 'ILP Profiles: Morgan Jones and the First World War', *Independent Labour Publications* <<http://www.independentlabour.org.uk/main/>> [accessed 14 September 2016]; Keith Robbins, 'Morgan Jones in 1916', *Llafur*, 1.4 (1975), 38–43, an article which publishes some very interesting correspondence.

62 NLW, E. T. John Papers 3756, John to Lang, 1 January 1923.

63 Chris Cook, *The Age of Alignment: Electoral Politics in Britain, 1922–1929* (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 195–96, 236, 240.

64 *Brecon and Radnor Express*, 30 November 1922.

65 Ibid.

of the Exchequer, Stanley Baldwin, to draw his attention to the rapidly escalating unemployment rates particularly in the vicinity of Brynmawr where large numbers of men had been out of work for between eighteen and twenty-four months, 'with the result that very acute distress prevails'. Jenkins urged that, consequently, the burden of providing relief should become a national charge rather than a local one. He also approached the Ministry of Agriculture to proceed apace with ambitious schemes of afforestation, notably in Wales. These would provide employment for significant numbers of unemployed ex-servicemen and would also provide a regular supply of locally sourced pit-props for the collieries of south Wales, thus obviating the necessity to import them from abroad at considerable cost.⁶⁶ The new MP was certainly making his mark in the corridors of Westminster.

By this point, E. T. John was regarded as a politician of some substance within the Labour Party in Wales. He was again subject to much pressure from the Anglesey Labour Party to consider the party candidature there, but had felt highly disinclined to stand there in opposition to the sitting Independent Labour MP General Sir Owen Thomas, veteran of 1918, who, he considered, 'though erratic, was estimable and fundamentally loyal to his Labour supporters'. There was also an appeal to stand again for Brecon and Radnor.⁶⁷ And, in the middle of March 1923, following the recent death of Sir Owen Thomas the previous week, and with a by-election consequently looming in the marginal division, the *Western Mail* prematurely announced that E. T. John had agreed to stand in Anglesey,⁶⁸ provoking an immediate missive from Beriah Evans:

I see by today's papers that the Labour Party has invited you to stand for Anglesey. The *Western Mail* stupidly says you are the Liberal nominee. There is a story behind the nomination – and I may say, in strict confidence, that I took steps a few days ago to eliminate your only serious rival for the nomination [...] If there is anything I can do to promote your interests in any way, you know you can always command my help. If R. J. T[homas] be the Liberal, and the Tories bring out a man, you should stand a good chance. At the same time I have no high opinion of, or much faith in, the present Labour organisation in the County.⁶⁹

In reply to B. G. Evans, John confirmed his intention to stand in the Anglesey by-election: 'Although owing to pressure of business, it is intensely inconvenient for me to do so, I have decided to accept the invitation of the Anglesey Labour Party. The state of the organisation, I daresay, leaves much to be desired, but there are compensating considerations existing at the moment.'⁷⁰ Evans then warned him that 'your chances are being materially endangered by some inexplicable

66 Ibid., 7 December 1922.

67 NLW, E. T. John Papers 3797, John to Lang, 12 March 1923 (copy).

68 *Western Mail*, 16 March 1923.

69 NLW, E. T. John Papers 3808, B. G. Evans to John, 16 March 1923.

70 Ibid. 3810, John to Evans, 17 March 1923 (copy).

defect in the machinery of your organisation'.⁷¹ John did, however, receive the full support of the powerful Anglesey Workers' Union.⁷² But the grip of traditional Liberalism proved too strong and Sir R. J. Thomas, an exceedingly wealthy local shipowner who had spent large sums of money nursing the key port of Holyhead, romped to victory with a total poll which exceeded that of both of his opponents. During the course of the campaign Dame Margaret Lloyd George had delivered no fewer than twelve powerful perorations on the island sharply critical of both the Labour Party and E. T. John personally. But, in the wake of the by-election contest, an Anglesey Divisional Labour Party formally came into being for the first time, a most significant step forward.⁷³ John's candidature in the Anglesey by-election had been a step forward for the Labour Party in rural Wales where success was considered essential if the party stood any prospect of gaining power at Westminster. At Llangefni on 6 April 1923 a high profile meeting of prominent north Wales Labour leaders was convened to consider the way ahead.⁷⁴

E. T. John was sensible concerning the outcome:

I have secured the support of 40% of the Electorate outside of the Holyhead area. At Holyhead out of 5300 votes cast, Sir Robert Thomas received 5000. He has evidently reduced that unhappy locality to the very undignified position of a pocket borough. We must move forward with renewed vigour in our camp for the economic emancipation of the workers and the political emancipation of Wales itself.⁷⁵

He had spent a total of more than £3000 out of his own pocket on the parliamentary elections at Brecon and Radnor and Anglesey – 'really a very heavy tax upon my modest resources in these days of acute industrial depression'.⁷⁶ His recent experiences in these two primarily rural divisions convinced him of the desperate need to improve Labour Party organization in Welsh rural seats. In the wake of his major defeat in Anglesey, he wrote at some length to the party's general secretary Arthur Henderson:

I will write you at an early date to consider specially the case of Brecon and Radnor. I really feel that the substantial amount we expended there upon propaganda and the Election itself justify the Divisional Labour Party looking to Headquarters for some help towards the salary of a full-time Organiser. I do not know at all whether they can do anything locally, but between Eccleston Square [the national headquarters of the Labour Party at London], the South Wales Miners' Federation and the local friends, this should really be

71 Ibid. 3859, Evans to John, 'Easter Monday', 1923.

72 *Holyhead Chronicle*, 9 March 1923.

73 See Pretty, *The Rural Revolt that Failed*, pp. 168–69.

74 Ibid., p. 171.

75 NLW, E. T. John Papers 3874, John to Professor W. J. Gruffydd, 11 April 1923.

76 Ibid. 3891, John to Arthur Henderson, General Secretary of the Labour Party, 13 April 1923.

managed. Even then it will not be at all easy to secure a candidate to tackle so scattered and difficult a constituency. I rather incline to regard my own immediate duty the building up of this organisation here in Anglesey.⁷⁷

John thus saw his future as a Welsh Nationalist but firmly within the Labour Party in Wales. Following the outcome of the Anglesey by-election, he wrote to J. Gwynoro Davies,

Believe me R. J. Thomas is no improvement upon [W. A.] Jenkins. He is at best a camouflage Coalitionist as Mr Asquith shrewdly perceives. As Hopkyn Morris has stated in Cardiganshire and Ellis Davies has similarly indicated at Shrewsbury, every Liberal who is worth his salt will very shortly be constrained to come into full association with the Labour Party in Wales. I consider I am rendering the best possible service to Wales by using every exertion to bring the existing Welsh Labour Party into the fullest sympathy with all the best ideals of Welsh Nationalism, and in this respect, I am glad to say, I am achieving a very notable measure of success.⁷⁸

Many pressed him to stand again as a parliamentary candidate. An approach came from the Llandaff and Barry division in August 1923, and he also came close to consenting to stand again in Anglesey, but, pleading serious health problems, withdrew at the eleventh hour.⁷⁹ Labourites in Brecon and Radnor too invited him to consider the vacant candidature, but on 19 November he wired Councillor Idris Davies of Abercrave, who was himself being named as a possible aspirant for the division, ‘Advised health not sufficiently restored enable me take part contest anywhere. Declined Middlesbrough West, Oswestry and Anglesey last week.’⁸⁰ And, just a week later, in the wake of the Conservatives’ decision not to put up a candidate in the division, he wrote to Davies at greater length,

It is just possible that the decision of the Conservatives not to nominate a candidate is largely the outcome of the complete quiescence of the Brecon and Radnor Divisional Labour Party since the last Election [...] It is [...] at any rate very clear to me that if the seat is to be contested at the next Election, which may very readily occur within twelve months, possibly very much sooner, it is absolutely necessary that the Divisional Labour Party should set about the most active propaganda and organisation throughout Radnorshire, rural Brecon as well as in the industrial areas.⁸¹

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid. 3894, John to J. Gwynoro Davies, 14 April 1923.

79 *Y Wintyll*, 22 Tachwedd 1923.

80 NLW, E. T. John Papers 4034, telegram from John to Councillor Idris Davies, Abercrave, [19 November 1923].

81 Ibid. 4044, John to Idris Davies, 26 November 1923 (copy).

Press columns recorded that, although there was certainly a demand locally for the nomination of a Tory candidate, an election pact had eventually been made with local Liberals to unite behind the re-election of W. A. Jenkins who, interviewed by the Conservatives who found him generally acceptable to them, was then returned unopposed.⁸² Somehow, in a general election where the issues of free trade and protection were the dominant questions, he had managed to support both, his versatile allegiances provoking a barbed comment from *Llais Llafur* that Jenkins had asserted, ‘Tariff Reform will save the country from ruin, and Free Trade alone will save it from going to the dogs.’⁸³ It was an eloquent comment on the difficulties facing the Labour Party in rural Wales at this crucial time that no party candidate stood in either Anglesey or Brecon and Radnor in December 1923.⁸⁴ Their absence inevitably led to widespread accusations of Conservative-Liberal electoral pacts. *Llais Llafur* pungently referred to the ‘unholy alliance’ of the two ‘Constitutionalist’ parties in south Wales whom it compared with ‘Annas and Caiaphus, Herod and Pilate’, readily co-operating to deny the Labour Party its rightful place in the political life of the area.⁸⁵

By July 1924, however, as the first minority Labour government ran its precarious course, Brecon and Radnor Conservatives had resolved that they must put up their own candidate when the floundering administration fell, now a likely scenario within months.⁸⁶ The announcement led to hopes in the Labour camp that a party candidate might possibly capture the division in a three-cornered contest.⁸⁷ And, on the very day following the Tories’ decision, a correspondent in the *Western Mail*, conjecturing that E. T. John might well now re-emerge as the Labour aspirant for Brecon and Radnor, was venomous in his comments:

“Wales – a nation?”

Sir, – Is it generally realised that since the Great War Wales has been losing ground as a national entity? This has been the case all round and affects all branches of administration. To make matters worse our national leaders appear to be quite indifferent to this retrogression.

When Mr Lloyd George was Prime Minister the Welsh people were reminded of the alleged indifference towards Welsh affairs shown by the Government of the day by manifestos frequently appearing under the name of Mr E. T. John, the President of the National Union of Welsh Societies. Mr John is heard no more. Why this ominous silence? Was the Welsh Home Rule propaganda of those days meant only to torment and embarrass Mr Lloyd George? Mr John has

82 Columns in the *Brecon and Radnor Express*, 11 and 18 October and 15 and 29 November 1923.

83 *Llais Llafur (Labour Voice)*, 1 December 1923.

84 See the pertinent comments in the *Liverpool Daily Post*, 19 November 1923, and in the *South Wales Daily News*, 10 October 1923.

85 *Llais Llafur (Labour Voice)*, 8 December 1923.

86 *South Wales Daily News*, 23 July 1924.

87 NLW, E. T. John Papers 4177, Revd Gordon Land to John, 3 July 1924; *ibid.*, 4193, Lang to John, 24 July 1924; and *ibid.*, 4194, Lang to John, 25 July 1924.

his own party in power now. What is he doing to save the Central Welsh Board and the Welsh Pensions Office? What words of comfort has he at this juncture for his bewailing nationalistic friends in the Principality?

In 1919 Mr John advised the Welsh nation not to accept a Minister who should be responsible to Parliament for Welsh Affairs – and Wales has suffered considerably since. What does he advise now?

I am, &c,
NATIONALIST⁸⁸

Then, in September, a renewed approach came to John from the officials of the Anglesey DLP. He was hesitant to consider the candidature there for several reasons – he was unable to spend much time in the division during the next few months, his wife had recently undergone extensive surgery, his business interests abroad were pressing, and he had just accepted the presidency of the Peace Society which was likely to prove irksome.⁸⁹ In Brecon and Radnor, however, where the Labour DLP had actually applied to party headquarters for a candidate, John, with much reluctance, allowed his name to go forward again and was adopted, again partly because of his ability to pay his own election expenses.⁹⁰ At the time of his adoption, the local Conservative press made a barbed assessment of the candidate:

Mr John is one of the curiosities of modern politics. A wealthy Middlesbrough ironmaster, past if not present director of numerous companies, with a lovely country estate at Llanidan Hall, Anglesey, he yet finds it possible to swallow Socialism including the Capital Levy. At any rate he included it in 1922. As his leader [Ramsay MacDonald] seems to have dropped it, we may not hear of it in Brecon and Radnor during the present election campaign.⁹¹

John made a potential dramatic increase in British trade the cornerstone of his campaign, following Ramsay MacDonald's successful diplomatic initiatives on the Continent. Less convincing was his pointing up of his party's recent success while in government in raising the levels of unemployment benefits.⁹² Generally, because of his fragile health, he was not as conspicuous in the division, seen as one of the most difficult to cover in the whole of the realm, as during the 1922 campaign.⁹³

Predictably, local Liberals re-adopted the sitting MP, W. A. Jenkins, but their appeal to county Conservatives to again honour the 1923 pact in support of 'an

88 *Western Mail*, 25 July 1924.

89 NLW, E. T. John Papers 4208, Arthur Williams, secretary of Plaid Lafur Môn, to John, 5 September 1924; *ibid.* 4225, John to Williams, 19 September 1924 (copy).

90 *South Wales Daily News*, 13 and 16 October 1924.

91 *Brecon County Times*, 16 October 1924.

92 *South Wales Daily News*, 24 October 1924.

93 For a sympathetic pen-portrait of E. T. John at this time, see Llywelyn G. Williams, 'A Labour Welsh Nationalist', *Llais Llafur (Labour Voice)*, 25 October 1924.

ardent Constitutionalist and anti-Socialist' against the 'common enemy' now fell on stubbornly deaf ears.⁹⁴ Local Tories felt that they needed to assert their presence in the county – they had never adopted their own candidate in this constituency – and they duly adopted Captain Walter D'Arcy Hall of Gwernyfed Park, Three Cocks, an estate which exceeded 300 acres. This was a man whose highly distinguished war record – MC and Bar, *Croix de Guerre* – was applauded time and again during the election campaign, while W. A. Jenkins, born in 1878, was often derided for being too old to participate in the war effort.⁹⁵ And there was much indignation in local Liberal circles that a Tory had ventured to the fray, thus splitting the anti-Socialist vote when there was a good prospect of victory at the poll. The constituency Liberal Association wired the following resolution to the Conservative Association as they met at Builth Wells: 'The Liberal Executive at their meeting this morning unanimously resolved to urge your Association not to put your candidate forward, but cordially invite you to support Mr W. A. Jenkins, who is an ardent Constitutionalist and anti-Socialist. Combined effort only can frustrate in this constituency the attack of our common enemy.'⁹⁶

The following figures, printed in the local press on the eve of the general election, are of some interest:⁹⁷

	Total Electorate	Men	Women
Brecon and Radnor	39,913	23,864	16,052
Brecon	29,459	17,556	11,603
Radnor	10,754	6,305	4,449

Late in the campaign W. A. Jenkins suffered a serious road accident and was thus out of action at a crucial time. And it was Captain D'Arcy Hall, an impressive fleet of motor cars at his command throughout a polling day which saw poor weather conditions, who captured the seat with a majority of 2,460 votes. E. T. John was in third place, but his poll was just 207 votes short of the Liberal total. The turnout was an impressive 83.6 per cent. E. T. John was stoical concerning the outcome of the poll, noting the modest increase in the Labour vote compared to 1922 and realizing that a long road lay ahead for the party in the constituency: 'It is not in Radnor and north Brecon alone that Labour will have to confront the task of converting the rural workers. Until this is done the dream of a Labour Government really in power will remain a mirage [...] Steady and unremitting spade work is needed in the intervals between Elections.' Given the substantial majority enjoyed by the recently-elected Baldwin Government, John appreciated that it was likely to remain in office for close to a full constitutional quinquennium so that the next general election might well not be held until 1929 – as indeed happened. He thus appreciated, too, that another 'standard bearer' would have to be found for Labour

94 *South Wales Daily News*, 16 October 1924.

95 *Western Mail*, 7 October 1924.

96 *Brecon and Radnor Express*, 16 October 1924.

97 *Ibid.*

in the constituency, and, on reflection, felt some relief at his recent rejection at the poll. ‘The duties’ of MP might well ‘have proved something in the nature of a last straw’ for one of frail constitution and indifferent, rapidly declining health.⁹⁸

The following August, 1925, Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru came into existence. John was generally sympathetic to its ideals and aspirations, but, having already defected from the Liberals to join the Labour Party during the Great War, was not in the least tempted to jump ship yet again.⁹⁹ He wrote adamantly to H. R. Jones, who became the new party’s general secretary and who – unlike other Plaid stalwarts like Saunders Lewis – was quite anxious for John to join their ranks, ‘I am quite satisfied that to set about forming a fourth party in Wales is just as unwise as it is superfluous [...] What is undoubtedly wanted is a Welsh National Self-Government Union, with its purpose to enlighten and organize opinion and action in Wales itself [...] I [...] most certainly will not take any action that would imply any sort of severance between myself and the Labour Party in Wales.’¹⁰⁰ He did, however readily advise the new movement’s leaders on the adoption of dominion status as its foremost political objective, a distinct step forward which occurred formally in 1930.¹⁰¹ Generally, Y Blaid Genedlaethol, for better or worse, dismissed John’s emphasis and strategy and focused primarily on cultural concerns, mainly the preservation of the Welsh language. John meanwhile gave priority to spelling out in some impressive detail the constitutional, legal, and financial issues opened up by the notion of federal home rule so close to his heart.

Thereafter he devoted himself to a variety of nationalist bodies such as the Union of Welsh Societies – of which he was president – and the Celtic Congress, and he was also president of the Peace Society from 1924 to 1927. He also wrote extensively in the Welsh- and English-language presses. It was a fitting post-script to John’s sterling efforts in Brecon and Radnor in 1922 and 1924 that he lived long enough to see the capture of the seat by a mere hair’s breadth by Socialist Peter Freeman in May 1929, a real, highly symbolic breakthrough for the Labour Party in rural Wales. Nationalist spirits rose, too, because of Freeman’s known sympathy for devolutionary initiatives.¹⁰² Indeed, both John, who failed twice to capture the seat, and Freeman, who narrowly won through, found it enormously difficult to break down the deeply entrenched rural traditions in the constituency and encountered severe Labour organizational weaknesses, especially in the rural areas. The Labour Party had only a small cluster of local parties strewn across the highly diverse division and there was precious little attention to organization at a constituency

98 NLW, E. T. John Papers 4252, John to Idris Davies, 1 November 1924 (copy); *ibid.* 4267, John to T. Jones, 2 December 1924 (copy); *ibid.* 4280, John to Agnes O’Farrelly, 23 December 1924 (copy).

99 *Ibid.* 4298, H. R. Jones to E. T. John, 13 January 1925; *ibid.* 4301, John to Dr Lloyd Owen, Criccieth, 15 January 1925 (copy). There are further relevant letters in the H. R. Jones papers within the Plaid Cymru Archives at the NLW.

100 NLW, Plaid Cymru Archives, H. R. Jones Papers, E. T. John to Jones, [January 1925]. Cited in J. Graham Jones, ‘Forming Plaid Cymru: Laying the Foundations, 1923–26’, *National Library of Wales Journal*, 22.4 (Winter 1982), p. 437.

101 D. Hywel Davies, *The Welsh Nationalist Party, 1925–1945: A Call to Nationhood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983), p. 268.

102 Information taken from NLW, Dr Thomas Jones CH Papers, vol. H21.

level as a whole.¹⁰³ And, in a trenchant analysis of Welsh political life as late as the 1950s, one historian has described Brecon and Radnor as, still, ‘an area where decrepit organization, inactivity, infighting and apathy were common place’.¹⁰⁴ E. T. John lived at Llanidan Hall, Llanfair Pwllgwyngyll, Anglesey, and latterly at Pickhurst Mead, Hayes, Kent. He committed suicide ‘by hanging himself whilst of unsound mind’ at Red Gables, Bletchingley, Surrey, on 16 February 1931.¹⁰⁵

103 Duncan Tanner, ‘The Pattern of Labour Politics, 1918–1939’, in *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900–2000*, ed. by Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 126.

104 Andrew Walling, ‘The Structure of Power in Labour Wales, 1951–1964’, in *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900–2000*, ed. by Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 207.

105 Cited from the death certificate by Kenneth O. Morgan, ‘John, Edward Thomas (1857–1931)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn <<http://www.oxforddnb.com>>.