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## LABOUR LEADERS AND LOCAL POLITICS, 1888-1902: THE EXAMPLE OF ABERDARE

PARLIAMENTARY victories have always grasped the imagination of the remembrancers of the Labour movement. So too, and rightly, have the creation and success of trade unions. Local elections have seemed less glorious. The ward politics in which many a national Labour leader cut his teeth are passed over quickly. The emphasis is not unfair, but while individual victories may be worthy only of footnotes, the broad context of local politics should be fully appreciated.<sup>1</sup> Urban politics in England in the Victorian period have been well analysed, but the role of the working class, especially in Wales, largely remains a fallow field.<sup>2</sup> The vested interests of the retailers, ministers and professional classes made local politics an unwelcome arena for miners, yet it could be an avenue towards political success and social respectability. The Local Government Act 1894 was heralded by Liberals as the dawn of a new age which would see the *werin* of Wales and, indeed, the whole nation advance to new heights of social and political fulfilment. The achievement of local democracy would lead to the enfranchisement of the workers and greater social equality.<sup>3</sup>

The public world of the miner in south Wales, beyond his place of work, was governed by several elective institutions. These were the local Board of Health, the Board of Guardians, the School Board and the Burial Board. In 1894 the first of these was replaced by the Parish and Urban District Council; the School Boards were abolished in 1903, while the function of the Burial Boards was taken over by district councils in 1902. Only the Boards of Guardians were to survive the early years of the new century and continue their Victorian duties until the late 1920s.

The good government of society depended on these public bodies, and rapid population increase and fluctuating local economies naturally influenced the actions and attitudes of councils and councillors. In an age of imperial pride, civic pride, too, was important. 'The fuss attending the local government elections is not to be compared of course to the wild doings of folks during a parliamentary war. But it should not be forgotten that the

<sup>1</sup> Henry Pelling comments on the importance of local politics to the Labour movement in the decade up to the First World War in his essay on 'Liberalism and the rise of Labour', in *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (London 1968), p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Derek Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England* (Leicester, 1976), ch. 6, pp. 115-54.

<sup>3</sup> 'Wales and the Local Government Act 1899' in *Addresses and Speeches by the late T. E. Ellis, M.P.* (Wrexham, 1912), ch. 7, pp. 165-66.

policy of a town is as important as the policy of the whole country, for does not efficient local government help to maintain England's [*sic*] prestige in the nations of the world?', observed the *Aberdare Times*. By 1900 the paper was looking askance at the town which stood like an island while its neighbours progressed.<sup>4</sup> It was the essential duty of elected representatives to maintain the town's municipal primacy over other coalfield districts. When Edmund Stonelake, the first secretary of the Aberdare Trades Council, moved from his native Monmouthshire to Aberdare in 1889, he was impressed with what he found. 'I was projected into a new world and a new life. I found myself in a far brighter physical and cultural environment. I was now in a town of 40,000 inhabitants instead of a village of 3,000. I got more of the good things of life as there were bigger and better shops and more in them...' This idyllic description was extended to include the better housing conditions and the 49-acre public park.<sup>5</sup> Between 1881 and 1891 the population of the Aberdare Registration District rose from 33,804 to 38,513; by 1901 the population was 43,365, distributed throughout five wards.<sup>6</sup> The people lived in a vibrant society with mines, tin works and railways; well-stocked shops and pubs; a varied sporting life with rugby and soccer teams, a youth side, the Aberdare Black Diamonds; a pigeon-fanciers society and the Tennis Club. A thriving *petit-bourgeois* network provided a host of services for the working classes and also dictated their political and social aspirations.<sup>7</sup> Under Liberal control, municipal activity in the town increased, and existing amenities were improved. Local reservoirs were purchased from the Aberdare Waterworks Company for £97,000; a sewerage construction scheme was undertaken at a cost of £35,310; the justly-acclaimed public park cost £5,000; the local fever hospital £3,000.<sup>8</sup> The townsfolk and the local board officials could be proud of their town, and frequent comparisons were made with the town of Merthyr as correspondents in the local press listed the public amenities and institutions which the latter did not possess.<sup>9</sup>

The good housing conditions to which Stonelake referred were common to most of the prosperous coalfield towns. In Aberdare in 1901 there were 26 tenements of one room, 370 with two rooms, 523 with three rooms and 3,129

<sup>4</sup> *Aberdare Times*, 20 October 1900.

<sup>5</sup> Edmund Stonelake MS. (University College, Swansea), ch. 5, pp. 6-7.

<sup>6</sup> *United Kingdom Census Returns, Report of the Registrar General*, II, 627 (1893), C.3563; Vol. 2 pp. 1073-74 (1893), C.6948. The population of the wards in 1902 was: Aberaman 10,982; Blaengwawr 8,041; Gadlys 8,283; Llwydcoed 7,066; Town 8,993. The males outnumbered females by 1,876.

<sup>7</sup> This is gleaned from the *Aberdare Almanack*, 1889-1901, and the *Aberdare Times* for the same period.

<sup>8</sup> *Aberdare Almanack*, 1889, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> *Merthyr and Dowlais Times*, 21 October 1892.

with four rooms. For Merthyr, the comparative figures were 46, 1,356, 1,460 and 3,996. The problem of house rents perturbed the inhabitants of both valleys. In Merthyr, houses over thirty years old, usually occupied by what was described as 'the lower class collier with large families', might cost 10s. a month. The better-off collier paid 12-16s., while at Methyr Vale and Treharris, 23-30s. was not uncommon. Many thought such charges too high, and amongst the societies formed in these years was one to force rent reductions. The Aberdare Urban Council was criticised for being a century behind the times and for its wastefulness and extravagance in the light of the town's pressing needs. In order to consider future generations, much would have to be done to transform the town into a more suitable condition.<sup>10</sup> This was the duty of the members of the School Boards, the Boards of Guardians and the Urban District Council, and each will be considered in turn.

The Aberdare School Board had been formed in 1871 and consisted of thirteen members elected for a period of three years.<sup>11</sup> By 1889 the Board was responsible for the administration of fourteen schools with accommodation for 1,749 pupils. The total number of children on the register was 6,519, and the number of teachers, including assistant and pupil teachers, was 201. In the following year, space for a further 100 children was provided, but staff numbers had decreased to 160 and by 1892 had risen to only 171.<sup>12</sup> Despite the active interest which the local working population seemed to take in educational matters, truancy amongst working class children was a major problem. By 1892 schools in the district could cater for 7,088 pupils; yet only 5,969 had enrolled, while actual attendance was 75 per cent of this figure. Between 1898 and 1901, an average of 20 per cent of children of school age was absent every session. In this period there were 811 convictions for truancy, mostly against families dependent on miners or railwaymen for their livelihood.

Financially, this was detrimental to the School Board's activities, as each absent child meant a loss of government grant. In a town like Aberdare this

<sup>10</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 12 June 1897; *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 24 February, 30 September 1898; *Aberdare Times*, 20 October 1900; *Aberdare Almanack*, 1901, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> In England the School Board elections were, of course, dominated by religious issues, but matters varied from town to town. Denominationalism was rife in Manchester, whereas Sheffield was thought more political, though even their elections were 'guided more by theological differences than anything else...', *Report of the Select Committee on School Boards (Voting)*, pp. 1884-85, XI, evidence of Benjamin Jones, qq. 1296-1624. The government had been concerned that the working class voter might not understand the proportional system of voting used at Board elections. But the secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Political Association was quick to point out that it was the middle and upper class voters who spoilt their papers, not the artisans, *ibid.*, qq. 5130-5134.

<sup>12</sup> *Aberdare Almanack*, 1889, p. 26; *ibid.*, 1892, p. 43.



might amount to £1,000 in a single year.<sup>13</sup> It was, indeed, the financial aspect of the education system which most concerned the working classes. When the Higher Grade School opened in August 1890, workers agitated to have fees abolished. Such action did not find favour with the School Board, which had already reduced the fees from 9d. to 6d. a week. It was pointed out that, because workers' wages and the poundage system were so high, the school fees at Aberdare were accordingly greater than elsewhere in south Wales, and due to the Assisted Education Act they were already losing £700 a year.<sup>14</sup> The working-class press accentuated its campaign for a Free Library and condemned the local and county councils for allowing sites to be taken over by the Constitutional Club.<sup>15</sup> A suggestion was put forward that representatives from the collieries and chapels in each locality form a committee supported by the School Board to induce men to join night classes.<sup>16</sup> Such a desire for self-improvement resulted eventually in reading-rooms and working men's libraries and institutes being founded. Here flourished debating societies whose membership included nascent socialists asking whether socialism should be encouraged.<sup>17</sup>

Working-class interest in education and awareness of social needs were far removed from the reality of power and from active participation. The importance of the miners in local politics was obvious to all, yet this industrial force seemed to have little desire to enter the political arena. Of the twenty-three candidates who stood for the School Board elections in Aberdare in 1871, six were nonconformist ministers, five colliery agents, managers or proprietors. In 1874 ministers were reduced to three out of fifteen candidates, there were again five colliery officials, and the rest were publicans and drapers. In the 1880s, the pattern is clearer. Apart from David Morgan, the Aberdare miners' agent who topped the poll, the 1886 list included four influential figures connected with the coal industry, five ministers of various denominations, four grocers, two merchants and a solicitor.

This was reflected again in 1889, though railway clerks and coal miners began to intrude. Nevertheless, the composition of School Boards remained

<sup>13</sup> *Aberdare School Board, Tenth Triennial Report*, 1901, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Aberdare Almanack*, 1892, p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 31 March 1898.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 16 September 1900.

<sup>17</sup> The Aberdare Young Men's Debating Society debated such a problem in March 1892, *Merthyr and Dowlais Times*, 11 March 1892; M. A. Turner, 'The Miners' Search for Self-Improvement' (University of Wales unpublished M.A. thesis, 1969); Hywel Francis, 'The origins of the South Wales Miners' Library', *History Workshop Journal*, No. 2 (1976), pp. 186-92.

fairly constant until their abolition in 1903.<sup>18</sup> The election of the first Board at Pontypridd in 1895 failed to produce a single candidate employed in manual labour, or standing on a specifically working-class platform. Those returned encapsulated the tradition of leadership in south Wales in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The victors were, in order, a colliery manager, a brewer, ironmaster, grocer, Baptist minister, grocer, schoolmaster, Methodist minister and Baptist minister. In 1898 the ministry still supplied the largest single occupational group of the twenty-one candidates.<sup>19</sup> Even more striking was the same election at Aberdare where, of the thirteen chosen candidates, eight were ministers, three colliery officials, and two grocers. The final election of 1901 resulted in the return of seven ministers, four colliery officials, a checkweigher and a miner.<sup>20</sup>

For the coalfield's *petit-bourgeois* society, its 'shopocracy' and its middlemen, education was essential in a world of trade and commerce, management and technical skills. It was no less essential to the aspiring members of the working class.<sup>21</sup> The several small groups which made up the component parts of the 'Labour Movement' in south Wales in the 1890s were acutely aware of the importance of School Boards to their local communities. The Marxist Social Democratic Federation (formed in 1884), for example, made a concerted effort to obtain representation. At Barry, where there was a particularly active branch under the inspiration of John Spargo, they obtained two seats. But this success did not extend into the valleys. The candidate proposed in Pontypridd, with the support of the Masons' Society, received only half-hearted encouragement from his party.<sup>22</sup> Further west, at Swansea and Llanelli, the trades councils were earnestly trying to break through onto the Boards; two seats were won in the former town in 1901, but in the latter denominationalism was to remain a barrier. At Cardiff, Board elections were consistently fought on religious grounds and this was largely the case in the coalfield.<sup>23</sup>

Politically deferential and conscious of their under-privileged position in local politics, the miners continued to support the election of a steady flow of ministers to the Boards. The committee of the National Colliery,

<sup>18</sup> This section is derived from the *Aberdare Times*, 1887-89, and the *Aberdare Almanack*, 1889-94.

<sup>19</sup> *Glamorgan Free Press*, 8 January 1895; *ibid.*, 15 January 1898.

<sup>20</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 9 March 1901.

<sup>21</sup> Davies, *op.cit.*, pp. 151-54.

<sup>22</sup> *Justice*, 29 March 1897; *Glamorgan Free Press*, 15 January 1898.

<sup>23</sup> *Swansea Workers' Journal*, December 1900, January 1901; S. Awberry, *Labour's Early Struggles in Swansea* (1949), p. 31. At Cardiff, School Board elections were always fought on religious grounds: *Cardiff Times*, 15 January 1881, January 1886, 14 January 1893 (I owe these references to Neil Evans).

Wattstown, could find nothing untoward in their actions when recommending the Rev. Morgan Humphreys 'to the sons of toil of the whole parish' for the Llanwonno School Board in 1889.<sup>24</sup> It was more difficult for the Anglican clergy, and when Isaac Edwards, the 'Labour' candidate, headed the poll at an election in which the rector of Methyr came bottom in 1892, the local press rejoiced.<sup>25</sup>

To counter the massive influence of religious leaders, it was necessary to find working-class candidates with theological beliefs and social standing, at least equal to those of ministers or priests. In places like Aberdare the choice obviously fell on union leaders, and in particular on the miners' agent. David Morgan, 'Dai o'r Nant', the Aberdare miners' agent, had attempted to gain office on the Aberdare School Board from its inception in 1871, several years before he gained high position amongst the miners, with the result that he had come nineteenth out of twenty-three candidates, with 274 votes. Clearly, he had first to become accepted and respected by the workforce and the electorate. Fifteen years later, in 1886, Morgan emerged triumphantly at the head of the poll with 10,000 votes.<sup>26</sup> He was now a popular local celebrity and had taken advantage of a rare moment of solidarity amongst the Aberdare workers created by a recent tin-plate strike. He was the only working-class candidate, so there was no fragmentation of the vote. In 1889 he was nominated with Thomas Williams, a miner, and John Davies, a checkweigher; they failed to secure seats, though each polled over 2,000 votes, while Morgan had to be content with 3,459 votes and eighth place.<sup>27</sup>

With the miners such a dominant workforce in the area, Morgan, John Davies and P. D. Rees were consistently nominated, even though they could not always be assured of victory.<sup>28</sup> Candidates from other occupational groups, however, did not always do well. In 1898, Morgan declined to stand for the Board. His place was taken by William Walker, a tactful, capable leader of the local Tinplate Workers Union who stood on his own surety so as not to affect union funds, and who, as a popular man, was expected to do well. In fact, he came sixteenth out of seventeen candidates. Although popular, he was not yet accepted as a leader of sufficient standing within the

<sup>24</sup> See the various handbills in the Reverend Benjamin Evans's papers, D/DXFU, Glamorgan Record Office, Cardiff.

<sup>25</sup> *Merthyr and Dowlais Times*, 11 March 1892.

<sup>26</sup> *Aberdare Times*, 15 March 1886.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 3 April 1889.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 23 March 1895.



community and his appeal to the workers to be faithful to him and to themselves fell on deaf ears.<sup>29</sup>

Until its demise in 1902, the School Board, more than any other body, would reflect the aspirations of both the working class and the nascent middle class of south Wales, as both groups sought to establish their status within the framework of late-Victorian Wales. Similar social characteristics and aspirations were displayed on the Boards of Guardians. There were perennial complaints about denominationalism and a lack of funds to fight a satisfactory election campaign. Manifestos were frequently religious rather than political in content and outlook. The three Liberal candidates in Merthyr's Town ward called on the people to ensure that 'Protestant number three ward is not represented by a Roman Catholic'.<sup>30</sup> At Aberdare, where the members of the Board of Guardians were nearly all Tory, the working-class press was outraged at the thought of the Innkeepers' Association contesting all wards against all-comers. In turn, the Lib-Lab Association continued to nominate nonconformist ministers for office. At Swansea, one election was decided on the toss of a coin at the suggestion of the Tory agent. His candidate lost, and the rather fortuitous victory for the trades council was acclaimed for the money that had been saved.<sup>31</sup> The Board of Guardians was the largest of the local government bodies. Fifty-four members sat on the Board at Merthyr. Occupationally, the structure was similar to that of the School Boards, though, significantly, the abolition of the property qualification under the 1894 Local Government Act enabled women to play a much more important role here than in any other institution. Invariably, they were members of Women's Liberal Associations, and the wives or widows of professional men who might also hold or have held seats on various public bodies. As the wives of leaders, dignitaries and men of influence, they regarded themselves as responsible for the social welfare of the general population while their husbands governed political life.<sup>32</sup> It remains in the 1980s a difficult task to persuade the male-orientated society of south Wales to accept the principle of representation by women. At the end of the last century, however, women were pointing out that the specialized scope of the Guardians' activities, with regard to poor relief and family welfare, made

<sup>29</sup> Some voters bemoaned the continual election of the ministers and priests, complaining that there were other men far more able to discuss 'business'. Rivalry was not restricted to denomination and an appeal was made for voters to make their decision 'heb ystyried na sect, cymdogaeth na phwll glo'.

<sup>30</sup> Handbill in MS. 4204, Cardiff Central Library.

<sup>31</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 31 March 1898; *Swansea and District Workers' Journal*, February 1900.

<sup>32</sup> See the symposium on 'The Progress of Women in Wales' in *Young Wales*, Vol. II, No. 17 (May 1896), p. 115.



women not only suitable but essential for the maintenance of the system.<sup>33</sup> For the many women who found it 'unseemly' to indulge in the politics of the local council, the Guardians provided an ideal refuge and accordingly enhanced their position in the local hierarchy.

Once again, working-class candidates were generally scarce. Of the twenty-nine nominations received for the eleven Rhondda wards in 1902, only one did not own his own business. His 449 votes failed to win him a seat in the Llwynypia ward against an innkeeper and a 'gentleman'. In the other wards, there were three 'gentlemen', three drapers, three grocers, two surgeons, two auctioneers, and one each of veterinary surgeon, physician, merchant, builder, hairdresser, innkeeper, landlady and 'spinster'.<sup>34</sup>

In the Aberdare region of the Merthyr Guardians, however, the trades council was trying to break the mould. In 1902 the miners' leaders were demonstrating a renewed interest in labour representation. Four of the five candidates nominated for the Guardians were checkweighers and the fifth was the manager of the local Co-operative store.<sup>35</sup> Amongst them was John Prowle, a checkweigher at Nantmelyn Colliery who achieved a remarkable success in the nonconformist-dominated Gadlys ward. His reputation as a prominent member of the trades council, a staunch socialist and a defender of miners' rights served him well at the time of the election.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, at the turn of the century, the working class was still not ready to enter the field of local politics with confidence. Forays such as those of Prowle remained exceptions which had yet to prove the rule. As 'one of the Spraggers' put it during a debate in the local press on municipal socialism in Aberdare, 'Is Ap Gwilym ignorant of the fact that Socialists are constantly proposing to the workmen to send people of their own class to represent them instead of sending others not to represent them?'<sup>37</sup>

In council elections, both at county and district level, the same was true. The membership of Glamorgan County Council at the time of the 1895 election consisted of 40 Liberals, 22 Conservatives and 7 'Labour'.<sup>38</sup> The latter were all established members of the various miners' associations and included David Morgan for Aberdare, Isaac Evans for Skewen, T. Daronwy Isaac for the Rhondda, and Thomas Thomas for Merthyr. Morgan, who had been returned unopposed in 1892, had a low opinion of the labour

<sup>33</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 4 October, 5 November 1894.

<sup>34</sup> *Rhondda Leader*, 9 March 1901.

<sup>35</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 28 February 1901.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, 28 February 1901; E. Stonelake, *Aberdare Trades and Labour Council, 1900-1950* (1950), p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> *Aberdare Times*, 24 March 1900.

<sup>38</sup> *Aberdare Almanack*, 1896, p. 17.

representatives, only one or two of whom, he thought, did their duty in preventing extravagant expenditure by the other councillors.<sup>39</sup>

Morgan, of course, was a Lib-Lab in outlook. When he was opposed at the 1895 election by William Thomas, a local colliery agent and J. P., both were described as 'Liberal and Nonconformist'. The ward which Morgan represented, the Gadlys, was staunchly of both creeds and the two opponents reflected the electorate perfectly.<sup>40</sup> Morgan did not have to adopt Labour nomenclature to represent his followers in a ward where working-class Liberalism was the accepted and anticipated norm, and where all other Lib-Lab candidates pledged themselves to support progressive measures while at the same time safeguarding the interests of ratepayers.<sup>41</sup>

Politics and class attitudes were important at county council elections, in fact, only when they could be used to establish a consensus and maintain balance and security in local society. For Lib-Labs it was often representation itself rather than the benefits which might derive therefrom which was important.<sup>42</sup> Support for a candidate depended on trust and parity of interest in terms of occupation and residence. When a meeting of the Caeharris electors was held in March 1892 to congratulate E. P. Martin, the manager of the Dowlais ironworks, on his return to the county council, the chairman admitted to not knowing the guest of honour's politics. Martin's antagonists charged him with being the candidate of the Dowlais Company; this, too, was refuted by the same chairman who stated that the interests of the company and the electors were inseparable. During the same campaign, electors at Penydarren complained of the efforts of the Town ward to create a contest by inducing an outsider to stand against their popular 'own man', David Davies.<sup>43</sup>

A similar situation was developing in the Rhondda. At Porth in 1900, D. Watts Morgan, a future Member of Parliament and, at the time, Mabon's acolyte in the Rhondda, attempted to stand for the county council. With the full backing of the local Liberal Association and an influential committee of tradesmen, his chances seemed reasonable. He failed; yet within a fortnight, the esteem in which he was held by the miners was demonstrated by his election to the S.W.M.F. executive. His defeat at the polls was put down to his brief residence at Porth and to his being an unknown quantity to

<sup>39</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 21 October 1894.

<sup>40</sup> *Aberdare Times*, 2 March 1895.

<sup>41</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 17 March 1898.

<sup>42</sup> R. Q. Gray, *Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (1976), p. 183; B. Barker, 'Reformism and the Labour Leadership in Yorkshire', *International Review of Social History*, XVIII (1973), 26.

<sup>43</sup> *Merthyr and Dowlais Times*, 4 March 1892.

inhabitants outside the collieries. In a pit community, the residential qualification was always of prime importance.<sup>44</sup>

Each ward in every town or valley had its own particular qualities. The Town and Park wards at Merthyr and the Town and Gadlys wards at Aberdare were barren ground for the Labour movement for many years. Their populations were mixtures of miners, traders and the lower middle class, and they tended to develop a certain suburban respectability. Since the county council was based in Cardiff, it was felt that only the most respected members of society should represent such wards. Thus, the Gadlys ward, it was decided, could not be placed in the care of a brewer, still less a socialist, but only in that of a lawyer.<sup>45</sup> When the socialist, Evan Parker, tried to introduce an element of conflict into the campaign by referring to an opponent as 'a colliery lawyer', and imploring the voters not to forget the class that brought the military into south Wales during the 1898 strike, he came bottom of the poll. Aberdare's first county councillors had included two colliery proprietors, a colliery agent, landowner, farmer and a Calvinistic Methodist minister who was also a tradesman.<sup>46</sup> Of the nine nominations received in 1895, eight described themselves as standing on the platforms of Liberalism and nonconformity, and one as Liberal and Church.<sup>47</sup>

Continuity of occupational class was maintained, too, on the level of parish and urban district government. In Aberdare the same names and occupations appear on the lists with monotonous regularity through the 1890s. With the implementation of the 1894 Parish Councils Act, a new era in the administration of local government and the advance of democracy began. But there was little to indicate this in the personnel of the new Urban District Councils. Membership was static, as one or two examples will show. Owen Harries, a prosperous grocer, was a member of the Aberdare School Board, the Merthyr Board of Guardians and the Aberdare Board of Health for nearly a quarter of a century. At the first Urban District Council elections of 1894, he was elected to serve the Llwydcoed ward in Aberdare. On this occasion, with 623 votes, he came third behind a colliery proprietor and an agent. Thereafter, he was returned unopposed on every occasion until his retirement in 1902. Similar instances may be quoted from Merthyr, where T. H. Bailey, the manager of the Plymouth Collieries, was elected to the Board of Health and the Board of Guardians in 1898 and became chairman of the Merthyr

<sup>44</sup> *Rhondda Leader*, 13, 27 January 1900.

<sup>45</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 7 March 1901.

<sup>46</sup> *Aberdare Almanack*, 1890, pp. 11-41.

<sup>47</sup> *Aberdare Times*, 2 March 1895.



Urban District Council in 1897. Professional men, with no experience in local government, were standing for the first time in 1894 and suddenly found themselves appointed to the vice-chairmanship of councils.

The list of candidates for the Aberdare Urban District Council in 1894-1902 shows that the most frequent aspirants for elections were colliery agents and managers, who stood on seventeen occasions. Following these were ministers and publicans, with 'gentlemen' appearing five times. Apart from these groups, of the eighty-six nominations received, eighteen were professional men and fourteen from the retail trades. By contrast, the miners were still showing little interest even at a time of strikes and consequent high local rates.<sup>48</sup> In turn, Liberalism in south Wales depended on the good-will of the lodges, both morally and financially; at a time of strikes, finances suffered. From 1898 to 1900, the Rhondda Liberal-Labour association made only one collection. Others had given more generously, £381 coming from the defunct Cambrian Miners' Association, £20 from the Western Valleys Association and £55 from the miners of Mountain Ash.<sup>49</sup>

The addition of the term 'Labour' to the title of many Liberal Associations was of little significance. It did, indeed, acknowledge the increasing importance of the working-class electorate, but this did not lead the social influence of miners' spokesmen to be translated into political power. Successful 'Labour' representatives were usually traditional Liberal trade unionists, who after 1900 found it difficult to accept socialism. The electorate was in tune with these views, as when the voters of the Gadlys ward, Aberdare, chose a minister to replace a deceased miners' agent, David Morgan, in 1901.<sup>50</sup>

When an unofficial trades council met at Aberdare to discuss the Parish Councils Act of 1894 and the advisability of having mining candidates, the coalowner, D. A. Thomas, who had been invited to attend, wrote to wish them success. He expressed the hope that several workmen candidates would stand for election, and was certain that all Liberals would vote for them. As he pointed out, Labour and Liberal were almost interchangeable terms in the Merthyr Boroughs.<sup>51</sup> David Morgan was vice-president of the Liberal Association, and during local election campaigns meetings in support of Liberal candidates were chaired by men, especially checkweighers, who had themselves stood as candidates in the 'Labour' interest during the 1894 local

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 10 September 1896.

<sup>49</sup> *Rhondda Leader*, 10 March 1900.

<sup>50</sup> *Aberdare Times*, 8 August 1901.

<sup>51</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 22 October 1894.



elections.<sup>52</sup> These were David Morgan (Ward 1); William Walker, Tinsplate Union Secretary (Ward 2); Joseph Price, checkweigher (Ward 3); John Simon, checkweigher (Ward 4); and P. D. Rees, checkweigher (Ward 5). Each of these, with the exception of Walker, came bottom of the poll in their respective wards.<sup>53</sup> The miners of the district had been far from united in the initial decision to support candidates. Meetings involving lengthy discussions, resolutions and counter-resolutions had only resulted in the question being referred back to the individual collieries. Consequently, the collieries of Fforchaman, Treaman and all those in Aberaman refused to nominate a candidate, and this certainly affected the result in Wards Four and Five.<sup>54</sup>

The miners still sought continuity in the institutions which governed their society. Agents and checkweighers were nominated because they were trustworthy leaders who could be relied on to reflect the attitudes of the rank and file. It was one thing to choose suitable candidates; but quite another to vote for them in opposition to the men who were considered the proper leaders of society and who demonstrated their concern for the well-being of the community by the expenditure of far more time and money than the ordinary miner could afford.<sup>55</sup>

How did this affect the nascent Labour movement in the localities? The newly-formed Treharris branch of the I.L.P. had three elections to face in March 1896, but could only find one candidate. During the municipal elections of 1897, the I.L.P. throughout the United Kingdom put up sixty candidates, but only fifteen were elected. None was in Wales. Not until 1899 did the party succeed in gaining representation on Welsh Urban District Councils (in Gwaun-cae-gurwen and Ystalyfera).<sup>56</sup> In March 1898, an 'Old Collier' had asked whether it was too much to have one out of every three Mountain Ash councillors as Labour representatives.<sup>57</sup> In neighbouring Aberdare, the electorate evidently assumed that it was. A specifically 'Labour' candidate stood at the 1899 local elections in the town's Ward 5 for the first time in five years. The man, James Ray, was in the traditional mould of working-class candidates, a deacon at the local chapel. As the caretaker

<sup>52</sup> *Glamorgan Free Press*, 25 March 1899.

<sup>53</sup> The newspaper sources for these figures have been supplemented by original lists in the possession of Mr. Cliff Edwards and the late Mr. Islwyn Williams.

<sup>54</sup> *South Wales Daily News*, 23 October, 6 November 1894.

<sup>55</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 15 March 1900.

<sup>56</sup> *Labour Leader*, 15 February 1896; *ILP News*, November 1897; *ILP Conference Report* (1900), p. 12.

<sup>57</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 24 March 1898. On the slow progress of Labour in south Wales, see J. Parry, 'Trade Unionist and Early Socialism in south Wales, 1890-1908', *Llafur*, IV, No. 3 (1986), 43-54, and on the slow progress of Labour in the Rhondda, David Egan, 'Noah Ablett', *ibid.*, pp. 19-31.

of the Cwmaman Working Men's Institute, a position he was to hold for over forty years, he had popular support and a useful power base.<sup>58</sup> But his opponent, John Bucknell, a publican and secretary of the Aberaman Reading Room, won easily by 481 votes to 302. The contest illustrated the importance of residence when both men relied on similar community organisations as the mainstay of their influence, Bucknell in Aberaman, Ray in Cwmaman. These were the two most 'working-class' areas of Aberdare, yet there was fierce rivalry between them and it was consequently difficult for Labour candidates to secure a foothold.

Gradually, however, as industrial discontent reached its climax during the six-month coal lock-out of 1898, and as the leaders of the working-class sections of society became more dominant within their own institutions, the political atmosphere underwent a subtle change. The workers of Aberdare were advised to choose David Morgan or John Williams of Ynysybwl, rather than Keir Hardie, if they sought capable leadership.<sup>59</sup> A watershed was reached as the south Wales miners realised the value of the Labour cause to them, and vice versa. By 1900 Tylorstown lodge had imposed a 1s. levy on each man in order to finance candidates at local elections. Shortly before the April election of the same year, the Cambrian miners announced their decision to support Labour candidates at district elections. They requested all labouring classes to do likewise, '...being of the opinion that it was high time that the working classes should open their eyes to their own benefit'. It was a similar sentiment which encouraged a deputation of miners, tinplaters, railway servants and stone masons to request David Morgan to stand as Labour representative in Ward 2 (Gadlys) in Aberdare in 1900.<sup>60</sup>

This campaign was especially interesting: it was to have direct bearing on the election of Morgan's successor to the Aberdare agency six months later. More important, it was to bring into sharp relief the dilemma which faced many Welsh working-class voters. A direct confrontation between the valley's Labour leadership and the nonconformist hierarchy was to develop. The election in the ward juxtaposed the two men whom many considered the most influential personalities in the valley's working-class life. Morgan himself had suffered a drastic decline in popularity after the failure of the 1898 stoppage. He was now more a symbol than a man of power. His opponent was the Reverend Benjamin Evans, Telyn-fab, a Baptist minister

<sup>58</sup> Papers in the James Ray Testimonial MS. (University College, Swansea).

<sup>59</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 7 July 1898.

<sup>60</sup> Tylorstown Lodge Minute Book, 9 March 1901 (University College, Swansea); *Rhondda Leader*, 24 March 1900; *Aberdare Times*, 24 March 1900.

of immense local prestige commonly called 'the bishop of Gadlys'.<sup>61</sup> Here, the labour groups were seeking to demonstrate that they were a valid political force in a ward almost overwhelmingly loyal to the nonconformist-Liberal creed. It was an admixture of miners and traders, a typical centre of Liberal strength. Evans was the epitome of the Liberal minister and, as the biographer of the great Reverend Thomas Price, he was a firm believer in ministers participating in politics. Since 1880 he had been a member of the Aberdare School Board, though almost defeated in 1889. His views on education were sufficiently general to appeal to the working classes whose interests he always claimed to have at heart, while still maintaining gradations in society. In the first elections to the Urban District Council, he had been elected second only to Rees H. Rhys, a powerful colliery agent. The 1900 election was the only occasion on which he was opposed.<sup>62</sup>

Many people in the ward were astonished. Morgan, always a Liberal, now seemed to be standing on an overtly socialist platform. He demanded new roads, electric lighting, a public reading room and an electric railway which should be managed by the U.D.C. for the benefit of the entire community, rather than by a private company for the profit of a few.<sup>63</sup> Many people in the ward could not understand why Morgan proposed such measures or why he was standing for election at all. Evans was regarded as a genuine representative of the people and '...as good a Labour candidate as anyone who sat on any Board in Aberdare'. Moreover, he did not receive payment for his services, whereas Morgan in his capacity as miners' agent received payment for his work even in the council chamber, and cost hundreds of pounds. Yet, again, residence was an important factor. Previously Morgan had stood in Ward 1. Why, asked the voters of Ward 2, did he not stay there and continue his struggle against the colliery manager, solicitor and grocer? Much more glory would have accrued to the Labour cause had he done so than in any campaign against Evans. These critics, however, overlooked the bitterness which had grown up amongst the mining community in the aftermath of the 1898 coal stoppage. Morgan's prestige had certainly waned. Yet he retained the support of his district executive; many miners were astonished at Evans's victory. During the great strike and the more local, though nonetheless bitter, dispute in Abernant in 1897, Evans offered to act

<sup>61</sup> See his obituary in *Y Genhinen* (1901) pp. 210-11, and the entry in the W. W. Price Index in the National Library of Wales.

<sup>62</sup> This paragraph is based on his small collection of papers at the Glamorgan County Record Office.

<sup>63</sup> *Aberdare Times*, 28 March 1900.



as an impartial arbitrator between the men and the employers. He was suspected of being unduly favourable to the latter and Morgan refused to sanction his proposals.<sup>64</sup> As a result, there existed much animosity between the two men. Evans accused Morgan of slander. He charged the leaders of the 1898 strike with mismanagement of funds and exhorted the Aberdare miners to open their eyes.

On the day of the poll, 1,139 electors cast their votes. It was not an especially high turn-out and was similar to that in Ward 1, where a trades council nominee was also standing in the only other contest. In the event, Evans won by 685 votes to 454. This was an immense blow for Morgan. His decision to adopt a socialist policy and to oppose Evans was rooted in a desire to vindicate the events of 1898. But since that climactic year he had drawn further away from his colleagues on the executive of the Miners' Federation. He was a self-righteous man, and an amount of bitterness and frustration had grown within him when beaten by William Brace, Tom Richards and Alfred Onions in elections to the executive, as it became obvious that his reputation in the Aberdare Valley was in decline. Victory over Evans, he had hoped, would rehabilitate him in the eyes of the miners and re-establish his personal position.

It was not to be. His failure demonstrated the miners' enormous loss of faith in his leadership. No longer could he be regarded as a viable working-class alternative to the existing spokesmen of local society. Morgan's supporters had hoped that his achievements of earlier years would be sufficient to make him the figurehead that was essential for united working-class action. But he no longer had the charisma and strength of character necessary to sustain his previously-held attitudes. What the miners needed was either solid, traditional leadership, or something new and vibrant. Morgan could supply neither, and so Evans won.

Within four months, both men were dead.<sup>65</sup> Now there was an opportunity for the miners to appoint a new leader and for the trades council to renew its campaign in the Gadlys ward. Voters who had no connection with the Labour movement were now demanding that the working class should seriously consider the advisability of defending its rights in the council chamber. When J. H. James, a local auctioneer, announced his intention of standing in the Gadlys ward, it was seen as all the more urgent to find a Labour candidate in order to frustrate the class which had halted municipal improvements, such as the tramway and library schemes. This cry was soon

<sup>64</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 5-12 April 1900; *ibid.*, 3 February 1898.

<sup>65</sup> Morgan on 11 July 1900, Evans on 23 August 1900.



taken up by the trades council, which called on the people to support a candidate who would protect their interests and not purport to represent a class.<sup>66</sup>

Eventually, Thomas Lewis, a butcher, fought for the seat. On a poll of 1,080 votes, he secured victory over J. H. James by 550 votes to 530. Lewis had contested Ward 1 in the April elections, and had come third below a popular colliery agent and a solicitor, who had hoped that one day he might prove himself to be 'a true Labour representative'.<sup>67</sup> His achievement in Ward 2 resulted partly from the fact that as a tradesman he had more sympathy from the ward's electorate than would a miner and that J. H. James was simply not liked. Although normally a Labour supporter, his views on socialism were tempered and cautious; for some time he was not adopted formally as the trades council's candidate. In later years, he came to look upon the I.L.P. as an extremist group and abandoned their cause.<sup>68</sup> Further success, however, eluded the Labour movement in the 1901-2 elections. Evan Parker, a pioneer of the socialist movement in Aberdare, contested Ward 1 in 1901 and took 26 per cent of the vote, but he had little hope of defeating the much-respected local colliery agent. In Ward 4, Thomas Meredith, a collier, and an active committee member of the Aberaman Working Men's Hall, forced the Powell-Duffryn's estate manager to bottom place, but he could still only come third; while in Ward 5 (Aberaman) T. R. Edwards, a checkweigher, polled only a fifth of the votes cast for E. M. Hann, manager of Powell-Duffryn. The trades council was sufficiently realistic to accept the fact that any candidate it proposed in Ward 3, the Town ward, would find very little sympathy with the shopkeepers and substantial ratepayers who resided there. The nominations of Charles Butt Stanton, the new Aberdare miners' agent, and George Richards, a railway worker, were therefore withdrawn in 1901. No Labour candidate was to succeed in this particular ward for a further twenty-two years.

The issues which concerned the electorate, whether middle-class or working-class, were broadly similar viewed from different aspects. On School Boards, the demands were voiced for better school provision, better building and more books and a healthier environment for children. David Morgan, John Davies and P. D. Rees had insisted on free unsectarian education for the children of the working class. The fear of the workhouse

<sup>66</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 13 September, 11 October 1900.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, 11 November 1900, 12 April 1901.

<sup>68</sup> *Aberdare Leader*, 3 May 1906.

was to remain with the families of south Wales for many years and the extension of outdoor relief was called for.

It was not only the 'professional classes' who were possessed of civic pride; the miners were especially aware of the traditions of Aberdare and they sought to improve the standard of living of the working class population to maintain the town's reputation, while at the same time trying to counter the ambitions of the 'commercial elements'. Hence, apparently minor issues such as the municipalisation of the boats on the Aberdare park lake provoked a storm of controversy, as representatives of Labour called for the pleasure of the many to be put before the profit of the few.<sup>69</sup>

More significantly, by 1902 housing had become a contentious issue. Evan Parker, a founder of the Aberdare Socialist Society, was insisting on a Housing of the Working Classes Act for the town. This had already been proposed by another I.L.P. candidate the previous year but was rejected.<sup>70</sup> As the pits in the valley produced more wealth and the pace of industry increased, the calls for municipalization 'wherever practicable' became more vociferous and many ratepayers began to look askance. Liberal candidates promised to safeguard the interests of ratepayers, while Labour nominees argued that it was the working classes who were the true ratepayers and that all rates and taxes were a burden upon the worker.<sup>71</sup> In an increasingly modern and highly capitalized society, questions of better roads, lighting, gas supply and rateable values were inextricably bound to wider questions of ownership, industrial power, and political and social change. Yet at this early stage such change seemed unlikely.

If one were to take Aberdare as an example, therefore, the general trend in this period of local politics was a desire on the part of the miners in particular, and the working class in general, to maintain continuity of representation. Once the initial candidates of 1894 were established, they dominated the political scene. A contested election was the exception rather than the rule. In the four elections of 1896-99, out of a possible twenty separate ward contests, only seven took place. A list of the unopposed members for these years shows them to have been a grocer, a lamp manufacturer, a hotel keeper, two ministers, a 'gentleman', a civil engineer and three colliery managers or agents. Not until 1899 was a sitting councillor defeated.

In the eyes of many of the working class, evidently, the established leaders

<sup>69</sup> *Aberdare Times*, 17 March 1900.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*, 8-15 March 1902.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*, 17 March 1900.

of society were regarded as adequate representatives. Those who aspired to office had to prove themselves in some official capacity either at union level or in one of the other facets of working-class infrastructure, such as the working men's halls or the Co-operative Society. Continuity of respect and status had to be maintained. As yet, the men who opposed the managers or solicitors had only belief in their cause to sustain them. Nothing tangible had been achieved. The 'geese' were indeed still electing the 'foxes' to order their affairs in 1902.<sup>72</sup> Over the next five years, however, this would change dramatically as more people recalled the cry of the trade unionist in 1898, 'A gawn ni fod yn ffyddlon i ni ein hunan? Cawn rhag cywilydd'.<sup>73</sup>

JON PARRY

Working Men's College, London

<sup>72</sup> *South Wales Worker*, 17 May 1902.

<sup>73</sup> *Tarian y Gweithiwr*, 24 March 1898 ('Can we be faithful to ourselves? We can, without disgrace').