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**'THE FOCUS OF THE MUTE HOPES OF A WHOLE CLASS'.
RAMSAY MACDONALD AND ABERAVON, 1922-29'**

Chris Howard

Few Labour politicians would give up a parliamentary seat as safe as Aberavon. One who did was the first Labour Prime Minister, James Ramsay MacDonald, who represented the constituency between 1922 and 1929. Close examination of MacDonald's relationship with his local party reveals many of the strengths and contradictions of the Labour Party in the decade in which it broke the mould of British politics and formed its first government.

Aberavon provided MacDonald with a congenial home after the personal nightmare of the First World War and the Versailles settlement. His criticism of what he saw as an unnecessary war and a punitive peace had made him notorious and his personal safety was several times placed in danger as he pursued his opposition from the platforms of the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Vilified in the national press as a public enemy, he lost his parliamentary seat at Leicester in the 'khaki' election of 1918 and failed to win the Woolwich by-election in 1921, largely because the jingoistic newspaper proprietor and politician, Horatio Bottomley, published his birth certificate, thereby trailing his illegitimacy through the national press and over the doorsteps.² For part of the Welsh press he was 'a hot gospeller of social revolution' and a 'sorry demagogue'³ but Aberavon provided him with safer ground and a base from which to re-establish his career.

The constituency was a scattered county division of the old Glamorgan, taking in the towns of Aberavon, Port Talbot and Briton Ferry along with Porthcawl, Pyle, Kenfig Hill and the villages of the Afan Valley to Blaengwynfi and Glyncoed. Its trade union membership was drawn from the collieries and the steel and tinplate works of the coastal strip. Consequently no one union controlled the nomination. Had there been more miners in the constituency, the Miners' Federation would have claimed Aberavon as the last of its ten allotted parliamentary seats. However, the leading local miners' representative, William Jenkins of Cymmer, was unpopular in parts of the constituency and a split between the local lodges persuaded the miners' executive to sponsor the colliery-dominated Pontypridd division instead.⁴

MacDonald's own position in the Labour movement had always rested on the ILP which had five branches in a division which had acquired a radical reputation. It was particularly well supported in Briton Ferry where its organisers were also trade union officials in the local steelworks.⁵ The branch there had recruited heavily at the Albion Works, boasted a

¹ This revised version of a paper presented to the Llafur/Port Talbot Historical Association Day School at Aberavon in October 1995 has benefited greatly from the suggestions made by members of the audience on that occasion. I am most grateful for their advice and information.

² David Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (London, 1977), gives a detailed and sympathetic treatment of MacDonald's life and political career.

³ *Western Mail*, (*WM*) 3 November 1922

⁴ I. H. Thomas to MacDonald, 31 August 1919, Public Record Office (P.R.O.), MacDonald Papers (MP), 7/52

⁵ *WM*, 28 May 1929

membership of many hundreds and was paying £25 a month to national headquarters in the 1920s, an impressively large amount compared to the ILP's average income from all affiliation fees.⁶ A prominent Briton Ferry activist, Ivor Thomas, prepared the ground for MacDonald's nomination⁷ and duly delivered the selection for him by prompting the miners to declare that they would not fund the seat.⁸ This effectively removed the ambitious Jenkins whose disappointment at not being selected in 1918 had been the source of some of the difficulties encountered at the previous election. On Thomas' advice, MacDonald wrote to mollify him and invite co-operation in the interests of party unity.⁹ Jenkins, whom MacDonald later praised as 'one of those quiet, solid, loyal and faithful men'¹⁰ withdrew and later secured the nomination for Neath, which he represented for many years. MacDonald was then selected unanimously though perhaps without complete enthusiasm on the part of the miners.¹¹

Reluctantly, MacDonald agreed to leave to fight Woolwich in 1921 after ensuring that Aberavon would be left open for him.¹² His failure in London did not dampen Welsh hopes and, by the 1922 election, unanimity and optimism abounded. Labour faced a majority of some 6000 but MacDonald's presence settled internal dissension and 'won a host of friends who on the last occasion openly opposed (us)'.¹³ He was confidently expected to win¹⁴ and did so, relegating the sitting Liberal to a distant third. Victory was made sweeter when he secured the leadership of the parliamentary party by a narrow but significant majority : Labour in parliament once more had a voice that could be heard. It needed it badly for in the years since 1918 its parliamentary party had been a damp squib, led by men who were either mesmerised by Lloyd George, outshone by Asquith or incapable of offering any cogent alternative to the government. After 1918, Labour became a national force despite the parliamentary rump not because of it.¹⁵ What then was happening in the constituencies to engender the optimism felt in Aberavon?

These were 'the years of attack' remembered Arthur Pearson, a Pontypridd activist, when Labour forged ahead by 'steady educational political effort', according to Herbert Morrison.

⁶ Thomas to MacDonald, 31 August 1919, P.R.O., M.P., 7/52; my interview with Glyn Williams (Bridgend), 22 April 1976; South Wales Miners' Library, transcript interviews with Tom Nicholas, 16 May 1974 & Len Williams, 25 May 1975. R.E. Dowse, *Left In The Centre* (London 1966), p. 19, gives affiliation fees for 1909-14.

⁷ Thomas to MacDonald, 23, 27 July & 31 August 1919, P.R.O., M.P., 7/52; Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p.280

⁸ Thomas to Tom Richards, 23 July 1919, P.R.O., M.P., 7/20

⁹ Thomas to MacDonald, 27 July 1919, P.R.O., M.P., 7/52; MacDonald to Jenkins, 1 August 1919, P.R.O., M.P. 7/20

¹⁰ *South Wales News*, (SWN) 3 December 1923

¹¹ *The Times*, 23 February 1920; *Morning Post*, 23 February 1920.

¹² MacDonald Diary, 28-31 January & 5,6 February 1921, P.R.O., M.P.,8/1

¹³ George ? to Ivor Thomas, no date but probably 1922, P.R.O., M.P., 7/23

¹⁴ MacDonald Diary, 9 May 1921, P.R.O., M.P., 8/1; *New Leader*, 3 August 1922.

¹⁵ *Fortnightly Review*, cvii (1920), pp 357-58 & cix (1921), pp 811-12; *Atlantic Monthly*, cxxx (1922), p 391; *Forward*, 10 May 1919; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 21 November 1919; *Daily News*, 5 January 1920; *Aberdeen Free Press*, 22 August 1921; Arthur Henderson to Sidney Webb, 17 May 1919, London School of Economics, Passfield Papers, II.4. More detail can be found in my 'Henderson, MacDonald and Leadership in the Labour Party, 1914-1922', pp 223-252, unpublished Cambridge University Ph.D. thesis, 1978.

But Morrison also knew that the post-war gains could easily be lost by 'studied indifference to public opinion'.¹⁶ It is worth remembering that the war had taught Labour's leaders a great deal about the fickle nature of populist politics. They also appreciated the chronic weakness in their own party organisation. MacDonald knew as well as anyone that Labour's advance had been built on the 'shifting sands' of government unpopularity rather than its own inherent strength.¹⁷ His experience in Aberavon shows both sides of this dichotomy.

At first, MacDonald seemed to suit the constituency. His socialism grew from a spiritual, emotional vision of humanity similar to that which underpinned the radicalism of the ILP and the Christian socialism of the chapels. He was, despite the 'champagne socialist' reputation of his later years, an austere and morally self-righteous man who would not have been out of place in a nonconformist pulpit. His Celtic romanticism, nurtured and constantly fed by his roots in rural Scotland, struck a chord in the isolated communities of the Afan valley. With his undoubted platform charisma, his principled triumph over adversity was to make him a natural figure-head for the movement in the 1920s. His victory would be a triumph for independent socialism and the underdog. When he came to Wales, it was not as a 'king-lackey' but as 'the focus for the mute hopes of a whole class'.¹⁸ He might well have anticipated a long and happy stay.

Initially, too, Aberavon seemed capable of living up to such expectations. In 1922 Labour won every contested seat in the Port Talbot municipal elections which took place just before the national poll.¹⁹ There was a Labour Party or Trades Council branch in each part of the constituency, and Ivor Thomas had prepared the ground very well through his 'pioneering' efforts.²⁰ MacDonald's ILP connections also enabled him to benefit from the commitment and skills of Minnie Pallister, a young ILP propagandist from Brynmawr. Pallister, soon to be the first Welsh woman to sit on Labour's National Executive, was an inspirational platform speaker and MacDonald readily acknowledged how much he owed to her organisation of the constituency.²¹ Her missionary zeal may also have strengthened Labour's appeal to newly-enfranchised Port Talbot women who supported Labour meetings and voted for MacDonald in unusually large numbers.²² No doubt anxious to avoid a repeat of the disaster at Woolwich, the local organisers ensured that prominent local ex-servicemen trumpeted their support. War veterans always appeared on MacDonald's platforms and in 1922 and 1923 there were huge parades of up to 1500 former soldiers in support of him. In 1922 MacDonald buried his own past in the sand and took the salute from ex-servicemen who had marched from Briton Ferry marshalled by Jack Jones, an expeditionary force volunteer and former recruiting sergeant now working as a miners' agent in the Garw valley.²³ The Irish vote in Port Talbot itself was also important and MacDonald's

¹⁶ Arthur Pearson (Pontypridd) to the author, 17 June 1976; *London Labour Chronicle*, February 1921.

¹⁷ *Socialist Review*, xvi (1919), pp 311-12

¹⁸ Jack Jones, *Unfinished Journey* (London 1938), p.209; Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*; quotation from p.281;

¹⁹ *WM*, 3 November 1922

²⁰ Thomas to MacDonald, 31 August 1919, P.R.O., M.P., 7/52; *SWN*, 17 November 1922

²¹ *WM*, 25 October 1926

²² *SWN*, 11 November 1923, 4 December 1923; Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p.281

²³ *SWN*, 7 & 11 November 1922, 3 December 1923; Jack Jones, *Unfinished Journey*, pp 208-209. The *WM*, 3 & 14 November 1922 detailed strong veterans' support for MacDonald's opponents.

1922 campaign specifically targeted Irish electors with Labour's distinctive treatment of the Irish question allowing it to capture a traditional reservoir of support for Liberalism.²⁴ MacDonald also gained extra help from party workers released by Welsh seats where Labour was unopposed.²⁵ Labour's thorough organisation impressed the *South Wales News* and even the hostile *Western Mail* recognised that MacDonald's careful nursing of the seat made a Labour victory virtually inevitable.²⁶

Some of MacDonald's meetings exhibited an extraordinary enthusiasm. 'Scenes reminiscent of the great religious revival' of 1904 were witnessed daily during the 1922 campaign and Jim Griffiths recalled a similarly stirring reception in Llanelli in 1924.²⁷ One of his constituents later remembered that 'it was like a fervour, a religious fervour...he was like a God, MacDonald was...I remember, as a youngster, being very excited'.²⁸ In 1923 he made a journey into Wales which bore comparison with Gladstone on the stump a generation before. MacDonald took two days to drive down from London because he 'had a magnificent time...people had not simply turned out and marched but had flowed in'.²⁹ He addressed huge meetings in Gloucester, Bristol and the Forest of Dean before arriving at Newport.³⁰ Here his car was decorated with green and white streamers, white heather and a huge leek and drawn for a mile up the long incline of Stow Hill to the Pavilion. Five thousand people packed inside to hear him. At Cardiff, his entrance was less spectacular but his journey to Charles Street attracted cheering groups of people all along Newport Road. At Cowbridge, he was met by 'a very large crowd' and the local M.P., Vernon Hartshorn, quickly organised a large gathering to greet him at Bridgend when it became clear at the last minute that he was intending to stop there also.

The official welcome to his own constituency began at Margam where thousands of people had been waiting for him in the cold, some for almost three hours. Here a wire rope was again attached to his car which was pulled by supporters in a torchlight procession into Port Talbot. At nine in the evening, he finally reached Taibach where he received flowers, used as additional decorations for the car, from Harry Davies, the Labour Mayor, before making further slow progress to the square opposite the railway station. At this point, the intensity of the crowd forced him to stop and he and Davies somehow managed to address it from the roof of the car. Although the procession later resumed in still-crowded streets, it was too late to hold the main meeting of the day by the time he reached the Baths some two hours after arriving at Margam. The official launch had to wait for another big meeting at the Grand Theatre the following day.³¹

²⁴ *SWN*, 7 November 1922 & 27 October 1924; *WM*, 3, 14 November 1922. D.G. Boyce, *Englishmen and Irish Troubles* (London 1972), pp. 62-3

²⁵ Egerton Wake to MacDonald, 18 October 1924, P.R.O., M.P., 7/25

²⁶ *SWN*, 14 November 1923; *WM*, 3 November 1922.

²⁷ *SWN*, 11 November 1922; James Griffiths, *Pages From Memory* (London 1969), pp. 51-2

²⁸ My interview with Glyn Williams, 22 April 1976; South Wales Miners' Library, transcript interview with Glyn Williams, 21 May 1974.

²⁹ *SWN*, 22 November 1923

³⁰ *New Leader*, 30 November 1923

³¹ *SWN*, 22 & 23 November 1923; additional oral information from John Corcoran & Arthur Rees of Port Talbot, April 1996.

At the end of the following week, the constituency organisation was strong enough to repeat the performance. Well over a thousand were present to hear MacDonald speak at the Grand Theatre on the evening of Friday, 30 November. On the following day, an estimated five thousand people headed by a brass band, marched through Aberavon town to the park.³² When the candidate for Cardiff Central had spoken of 'our beloved leader' some days before, he was clearly speaking for many thousands of highly expectant Labour voters.³³ In Aberavon they proudly displayed MacDonald's picture in their parlours.³⁴ He was indeed a somewhat messianic figure, reflecting and personifying the struggle of the movement through the testing time of the previous eight years. His supporters were longing for a strong lead and eager to see the one man in the party who could rival Lloyd George and take Labour to Downing Street. The future seemed assured.

Table 1: The Labour Vote in the South Wales Coalfield 1922-29*

	1918	1922	1923	1924	1929
Eastern valleys: (Abertillery, Bedwellty, Caerphilly, Ebbw Vale, Pontypool)	50.5	56.8	60.0	55.8	60.9
Taff: Rhondda: (Aberdare, Merthyr, Pontypridd, Rhondda East, Rhondda West)	37.2	54.9	62.1	59.1	58.5
Western valleys: (Aberavon, Gower, Ogmore, Llanelli, Neath)	43.2	55.1	58.0	54.4	56.4

*Figures express Labour's average percentage of votes cast in contested divisions

In some parts of the coalfield Labour seats could still be threatened by tacit anti-socialist alliances, Charles Edwards holding Bedwellty by only 326 votes in 1923, but most of the constituencies were safe for Labour after 1924. 'The edge of involvement in meetings was sharpening as elections were being won' and it was relatively simple to get together large public meetings and find an ample supply of speakers.³⁵ Local activists were prepared to give large amounts of their time to propaganda work as a monthly diary of Labour Party activity in Aberavon in January 1926 shows. In the calendar month there were 6 business meetings, 25 meetings addressed by various local and national speakers including A.J. Cook and Manny Shinwell, 5 social events and an eisteddfod (in January!) at Pontrhydyfen.³⁶

³² *SWN*, 3 December 1923

³³ *SWN*, 22 November 1923

³⁴ Clive Jenkins in the *Sunday Times Magazine*, 2 May 1976

³⁵ Arthur Pearson (Pontypridd) to the author, 17 June 1976.

³⁶ Aberavon CLP, Organiser's Report, January 1926, P.R.O., M.P., 7/26. The full diary is printed in my article 'Expectations born to death: local Labour party expansion in the 1920s' in Jay Winter (ed.), *The Working Class in Modern British History* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 74

Activity on such a scale was perhaps exceptional and may have had few parallels outside the coal fields, the West Riding or the Clyde, where the ILP held large open-air meetings every week³⁷ although I have found examples of Labour eisteddfodau being held in rural Hertfordshire in the inter-war period!³⁸

In return for their time-consuming efforts party workers demanded a great deal from their leaders and MPs were obliged to make frequent visits to each township and village in these scattered divisions. On the final day of the 1923 campaign T.I. Mardy-Jones visited fifteen centres in the Pontypridd constituency, Tom Griffiths addressed a dozen meetings in Pontypool and Charles Edwards spoke at 13 different meetings at Bedwellty in the evening.³⁹ MacDonald's constituents expected to see him in each village at least once a year⁴⁰ perhaps a not unreasonable request at a time when Westminster was even more remote from ordinary lives and Labour leaders were expected to be propagandists as much as politicians. However, it took some 22 meetings to cover each district in the constituency and MacDonald could not easily spare such time.⁴¹ Early in 1926, though he knew the coal crisis to be coming to a head, he insisted that he could spare only two or three Fridays for Aberavon, these to be occupied with no more than one meeting a night in 'a quiet, leisurely way...running in and then running away is not effective'.⁴² Later in the year he complained that he 'could never get clear of work' and that 'coming down so often is becoming a most terrible problem'.⁴³ Clearly, by the mid-twenties the demands on MacDonald's energies were becoming too great to tolerate.

Why was this so? One reason is that time was catching up with him. In 1926 he reached the sixtieth year of a life filled with speaking tours, propaganda events and the incessant struggle to keeping the highly flammable Labour Party on a relatively even keel. His health was becoming more of a problem. While his platform oratory was spell-binding, it also took a lot out of him. 'He is having his strength taxed beyond measure', his secretary warned in 1924. 'I have seen him after a big effort at a meeting, almost broken up', she wrote in April 1926. The Labour Movement would have to remember that he was 'just flesh and blood'. But the party was not sufficiently well organised to nurse its leader, much to MacDonald's annoyance.⁴⁴

The affairs of the party in Aberavon were also proving increasingly irritating. By 1926 Minnie Pallister had moved to suburban Hertfordshire⁴⁵ and the permanent agent, Joe Brown, paled by comparison. The heady optimism of 1922 and 1923 had been eroded by the slump and the seat was proving to be more difficult to organise than previously imagined.

³⁷ John MacNair, *James Maxton : Beloved Rebel* (London 1955), p.97

³⁸ Herts. County Record Office, Herts. Labour Federation Minute Books, 1932-34.

³⁹ *SWN*, 6 December 1923

⁴⁰ Joe Brown to McDonald, 16 November 1925, P.R.O., M.P., 7/26

⁴¹ Rose Rosenberg to Egerton Wake, 21 October 1924, P.R.O., M.P., 7/25

⁴² MacDonald to Brown, 10 February 1926, P.R.O., M.P., 7/27

⁴³ MacDonald to Brown, 6 December 1926, P.R.O., M.P., 7/27

⁴⁴ Rosenberg to Wake, 21 October 1924, P.R.O., M.P., 7/25; Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, pp 395-96

⁴⁵ *WM*, 25 October 1926

Part of the problem lay in its economic base. The South Wales Miners' Federation had never been keen to support coalfield candidates from outside the union⁴⁶ and this made constituency finances more vulnerable than MacDonald had anticipated. The poverty of the coalfield in the slump aggravated the problems. Brown reported 6,000 unemployed in the constituency in October 1925 with steel and tinsplate workers suffering along with the miners.⁴⁷ As MacDonald told Brown, financial difficulties were inevitable in such circumstances.⁴⁸ In 1925 only 8 of the 28 miners' lodges paid their affiliation fees and the local party had only £17 in the bank.⁴⁹ During the coal dispute the following year, some 17,000 tinsplate workers were reported also to be idle across south Wales,⁵⁰ many of them, no doubt, in the Aberavon constituency. None of the miners' lodges or the iron and steelworkers branches paid their affiliation fees in 1926.⁵¹ Early in that year MacDonald was obliged to 'beg...amongst friends' in order to secure an additional £30 for the local party. Although he recognised the degree of distress, he was clearly irritated by having to support 'the ordinary political machinery in this way'.⁵² His rather weak suggestion that the constituency hold a May Fair was thought by Brown to be unrealistic even before such thoughts were eclipsed by the coal stoppage.⁵³ No money was received to run the Aberavon party during the six month lock-out and at the end of 1926 there was just £7 4s.1d. in the party's bank account.⁵⁴ Brown, who had '(gone) in for a very big thing when (he) bought his house' was worried that he could not raise enough funds to cover his own salary and his £800 mortgage.⁵⁵ MacDonald was continually being asked to subscribe more than his regular £20 a year or the £350 he had contributed to the running of the 1924 campaign.⁵⁶

In the midst of the hardship of the lock-out MacDonald's pocket must have seemed very deep to struggling miners and steelworkers but he was not himself a wealthy man. He still had to work as a journalist in order to pay his own family's bills and this explains why he was so loath to give up his entire week-end to the local party.⁵⁷ 'So far as finance is concerned', he wrote in 1925, 'my ship is scraping bottom'⁵⁸ and by the end of 1926 he was telling Brown that 'you will have to get hold either of a millionaire or of someone who does not have to look after a family and pay heavy bills'.⁵⁹ MacDonald should have been used

⁴⁶ Roy Gregory, *The Miners in British Politics* (Oxford 1968). My interview with James Griffiths, 3 December 1973 revealed exactly these difficulties in E. Carmarthen in 1912.

⁴⁷ Brown to MacDonald, 5 October 1925, P.R.O., M.P., 7/26

⁴⁸ MacDonald to Brown, 18 November 1925, P.R.O., M.P., 7/26

⁴⁹ Brown to MacDonald, 4 November 1925 & 16 November 1925, P.R.O., M.P., 7/26

⁵⁰ *WM*, 23 October 1926

⁵¹ Brown to MacDonald, 5 March 1927, P.R.O., M.P., 7/28

⁵² MacDonald to Brown, 10 February 1926 & Brown to MacDonald 22 February 1926, P.R.O., M.P. 7/27.

⁵³ Rosenberg to Brown, 19 February 1926 & Brown to MacDonald, 22 February 1926, P.R.O., M.P. 7/27

⁵⁴ Brown to Rosenberg, 11 November 1926 & Brown to MacDonald, 5 March 1927, P.R.O., M.P., 7/27 & 7/28

⁵⁵ Brown to MacDonald, 5 August 1927 & 17 August 1927, P.R.O., M.P. 7/27.

⁵⁶ Brown to MacDonald, 5 November 1924 & MacDonald to Brown, 18 November 1925, P.R.O., M.P. 7/25 & 7/26

⁵⁷ Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p.398; MacDonald to Brown, 10 February 1926 & 6 December 1926, P.R.O., M.P. 7/27

⁵⁸ Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p.398

⁵⁹ MacDonald to Brown, 6 December 1926, P.R.O., M.P., 7/27

to this for he had been a frequent contributor to his Leicester constituency party in the pre-war period⁶⁰ but he was in those days an ambitious member of a minor party with a reputation to create and a local newspaper to support. Now he was an ex-Prime Minister, assured of finding an audience but with the burdens of Opposition weighing heavily on him. Jack Jones, providing an accurate grass-roots perspective, recalled that 'he had, between two visits, been transformed from the "Mac" we had known into the elder statesman who spoke of the "cares of office"'.⁶¹ It was now 'a physical impossibility...to look after the constituency as though (he) had nothing else to do or had just the burdens of an ordinary member of parliament to carry'.⁶²

Another explanation of MacDonald's difficulties can be found in the realisation that the reputation of the conquering hero of earlier years had been tarnished during 1926. MacDonald had never made any secret of his contempt for the tactics of direct action and his insistence on parliamentary and constitutional activity. He had always loathed any appeal to crude populism, the 'crowd rush of emotion' as he had called it in 1918,⁶³ and he felt that the revolutionary demagogue, A.J. Cook, was the most incompetent union leader he had ever known. At the 1925 Labour Party conference he succeeded in securing the effective banning of Communists from Labour membership and bolstered his dominance of the mainstream of the party. His constituent and colleague William Jenkins told him that 'Aberavon Division is highly pleased'. Such action delighted the moderates but could not prevent the Labour movement running headlong into a coal dispute and general strike. MacDonald felt this could only benefit a government which he knew full well would have thoroughly prepared its own defence of the state through the use of *OMS*. But he had little or no influence on the events of 1926.⁶⁴

This was also true of his position in the Aberavon constituency. The upper Afan valley marched for him in 1923⁶⁵ : it would have extended him only a lukewarm welcome during the miners' dispute. In October serious disturbances occurred at Cymmer and Heolgywynt when miners and women used sticks, stones and jam-jars to attack lorries carrying black-legs from Port Talbot. Thirty-nine men and women were subsequently imprisoned or fined. Police re-enforcements had to be brought into the valley to control what has been described as 'guerrilla action' in a 'twilight world', a stubborn resistance born from despair.⁶⁶ David Chappell, the most aggressive of the Cymmer rioters, articulated this in a court case which attracted much attention : 'I am desperate and mad', he told the magistrates who sentenced him to three months hard labour in October 1926.⁶⁷ At roughly the same time, MacDonald left Britain for a month-long tour of the Sahara in the company of his 'wealthy friends', the Buxtons.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Correspondence with *Leicester Pioneer*, 1910-1915, P.R.O., M.P., 5/87

⁶¹ Jones, *Unfinished Journey*, p.210

⁶² MacDonald to Brown, 27 September 1927, P.R.O., M.P., 7/28

⁶³ *Forward*, 21 December 1918

⁶⁴ Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, pp. 426-440

⁶⁵ *SWN*, 29 November 1923

⁶⁶ Hywel Francis & David Smith, *The Fed: The South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, (London 1980), pp 60-63

⁶⁷ *WM*, 19 October 1926

⁶⁸ *WM*, 21 October 1926; the description is MacDonald's in his letter to Brown, 10 February 1926, P.R.O., M.P., 7/27

What were his struggling constituents to make of an M.P. who had put clear water between himself and such rank and file protest? Not everyone in Aberavon shared Jenkins' pleasure at the exclusion of the Communists. In February 1926, MacDonald was embarrassed when the Port Talbot Labour Association voted 39-12 against the Liverpool conference decision.⁶⁹ Joe Brown could only explain this away by claiming that 74 delegates had stayed away from the meeting.⁷⁰ There were indications from the local elections too that all was not well and that support for the MP had fallen away since 1923.⁷¹

Another source of difficulty seems to have been Joe Brown himself. In 1927 MacDonald touched on some deeper problems when he admitted that 'the local people do not appear to be playing the game with you at all'.⁷² He had, not surprisingly, been unable to raise funds from miners' lodges who must have wondered why their members should be asked to pay the salary of a Labour Party agent. Only three members were prepared to support a constituency spring bazaar in response to 240 requests and only the Briton Ferry district had paid its full subscriptions.⁷³ Uncertainty over Brown's position created further tension. He thought of resigning to take on a pub in the summer of 1927 and was interviewed by Hancocks before declining their offer of the *Talbot Hotel*.⁷⁴ An increasingly impatient MacDonald was disturbed to hear of 'all sorts of caves and cliques' and rumours that he was canvassing in support of Brown at the highest levels of the brewery trade. Again in October 1927 he told Brown that 'these public house rumours don't help', for by now he was becoming seriously worried about the possibility of losing not his agent but the seat.⁷⁵

In August 1927, Jack Rees, an Aberavon party worker wrote to MacDonald's office to warn that unemployment was high, all industries were more or less on short-time and that every Labour representative was being criticised by the rank and file. MacDonald was not exempt from this with some objecting to his action during the miners' strike and others to his travels abroad. Such bickering meant that the future was now much more unpredictable:

J.R.M. will have to fight hard, otherwise the seat is lost. The Liberals are pegging away with all their might, the Tories have also selected a candidate, at the last moment a pact will be made in order to oust Labour...This seat is not safe by any means.⁷⁶

Brown still felt that there was 'no safer seat in the country'⁷⁷ but Rees' letter shows more than an activist's mid-term blues. Mute hope had become brutal disappointment. MacDonald had not done enough for the miners nor was he providing the radical leadership that a new generation of ILP activists demanded. When the 1927 ILP conference

⁶⁹ *Workers Weekly*, 26 February 1926

⁷⁰ Brown to MacDonald, 28 February 1926, P.R.O., M.P., 7/27

⁷¹ Brown to Rosenberg, 4 November 1925 & 11 November 1926, P.R.O., M.P., 7/26 & 7/27.

⁷² MacDonald to Brown, 8 March 1927, P.R.O., M.P., 7/28

⁷³ Brown to MacDonald, 17 August, 1927, P.R.O., M.P. 7/28

⁷⁴ Brown to MacDonald, 5 & 17 August, 1927 & J. Rees to Rosenberg, 20 September 1927, P.R.O., M.P. 7/28

⁷⁵ MacDonald to Brown, 27 September & 2 October 1927, P.R.O., M.P., 7/28

⁷⁶ Rees to Rosenberg, 15 August 1927, P.R.O., M.P., 7/28

⁷⁷ Brown to MacDonald, 5 August 1927, P.R.O., M.P., 7/28

marked a parting of the ways between them, Westminster gossip immediately began to speculate that this would lead to a break between MacDonald and Aberavon's numerous ILP members too. As a result his position was felt to be no longer safe. In a well-informed lobby story, the *Western Mail* confidently predicted that MacDonald would soon be on the move to a seat in County Durham which Sidney Webb was about to give up.⁷⁸

Although there is no sign of any move against the M.P. from within, it does seem that the Leader of the Opposition's relationship with his own constituency party had gone sour by 1928. For many locally, it must have seemed that MacDonald's support for the miners was but a little and a little too late. While hardship was everywhere in the coalfield, MacDonald and his agent struggled to get by, both personally and politically. But, importantly, they were not trade-union sponsored and they were asking for financial support from those who had little to give while not appearing to make great personal sacrifices themselves.

When, as the *Western Mail* had foreseen, Labour's National Executive suggested that MacDonald move to Seaham Harbour, he put up only token resistance. Sidney Webb's constituency could pay its own way and would not demand so much of his time.⁷⁹ A few were prepared to stand in MacDonald's way but others were no doubt relieved to see him go.⁸⁰ In 1929 Aberavon selected the Treherbert-born former teacher, W.G. Cove, who had been sitting for Wellingborough since 1923. Cove was comfortably returned, increasing Labour's share of the vote and beginning an unbroken tenure lasting three decades. MacDonald was elected at Seaham which he represented until his defeat by Manny Shinwell in 1935. Joe Brown too moved on, becoming the licensee of a local pub, the *Somerset House*.⁸¹ By then, MacDonald had put the clear blue water of his National Government between himself and his former supporters.

Aberavon was, and is, one of Labour's safest seats. If Labour could find it difficult to organise there, it would have difficulties in very many places in the inter-war period. And so it was to be. There was no immediate majority control of parliament and this was not a golden age of working-class politics.⁸² Even so, MacDonald formed two governments and established Labour as a major party of state. More than seventy years on from those triumphant torchlight processions in 1923, how many Labour activists can claim to have celebrated in such style the arrival of a charismatic Labour prime minister-in-waiting, still less one who personifies the hopes of their class or generation?

⁷⁸ *WM*, 20 April 1927

⁷⁹ Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, pp 481-482

⁸⁰ Sheila Lochhead (MacDonald's daughter) to the author, 18 August 1975; my interview with Glyn Williams, 22 April 1976; Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, p.482

⁸¹ Oral information from Arthur Rees (Port Talbot), April 1996

⁸² See my article 'Expectations Born to Death' in Winter (ed.), *The Working Class in British Politics*, pp. 65-81