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THE CARDIGANSHIRE ELECTION OF 1966

J. GRAHAM JONES

The belated Labour capture of Cardiganshire in the general election of 31 March 1966 was of especial significance.¹ The local Divisional Labour Party had not been set up until 1918 and, most surprisingly, while the Labour Party had put up candidates in an ever increasing number of parliamentary constituencies – industrial, rural and urban alike – throughout the 1920s, Cardiganshire was not contested until the 'Doctor's Mandate' general election of October 1931 held swiftly upon the heels of the formation of the so-called national government the previous August. It has been argued that the deep-rooted, vehement cleavage in the ranks of the Cardiganshire Liberals from 1921 onwards gave to the county's political life an unique homespun dynamism which somehow held back the rise of Labour in the area.²

The Labour Party's exceptionally slow progress in Cardiganshire contrasted starkly with the impact of the party in much of rural Wales where it had, to a large extent, succeeded in inheriting the mantle of Liberalism as the radical, progressive party and as the agent of Welsh national aspirations. Even remote Anglesey was represented, in rather bizarre circumstances, by an Independent Labour MP, in the person of General Sir Owen Thomas, in 1918-22. Neighbouring Caernarfonshire fell to quarryman's champion R. T. Jones in 1922, albeit for one parliament. The anomalous University of Wales constituency, too, was captured by the Revd George Maitland Lloyd Davies in 1923, initially as a 'Christian Pacifist' aspirant for parliament, although he soon took the Labour whip in the House of Commons once elected. This highly symbolic victory was symptomatic of a change of allegiance of the part of the Welsh intelligentsia and professional classes, graduates of the national university. In the general election of 1929, a notable advance for the Labour Party nationally which led to the formation of its second minority government, it also captured marginal constituencies like Brecon and Radnor, Carmarthenshire and Wrexham, the last named division represented by university academic and prominent economist Professor Robert Richards. All three seats were, almost inevitably, forfeited in the election of October 1931 when the party was decimated almost beyond belief at the polls, but Carmarthen and Wrexham were still re-captured in 1935 and Brecon and Radnor in a by-election in August 1939. Clearly, the Labour Party was well capable of gaining a number of Welsh constituencies far beyond the famous 'red belt' of parliamentary divisions in the south Wales coalfield which extended in a great arc from Llanelli in the west to Pontypool in the east. Between 1945 and 1957, the party succeeded in mopping up all the rural constituencies of west and north Wales – with the exception of Cardiganshire which at the time appeared impregnable Liberal territory.

The general election of March 1966 was an auspicious occasion for the Labour Party to capture Cardiganshire. The party had formed a government in October 1964 with a tiny overall majority in the House of Commons and had managed the country generally skilfully in the meantime. Prime Minister Harold Wilson was almost compelled to go to the country in the early spring of 1966 in the hope of

¹ On this theme, see Howard C. Jones, 'The Labour Party in Cardiganshire, 1918-66', *Ceredigion* IX (1981), pp. 150-61. See also J. Graham Jones, 'Cardiganshire politics, 1885-1974' in Geraint H. Jenkins and Ieuan Gwynedd Jones (eds), *Cardiganshire County History, Vol. 3, Cardiganshire in Modern Times* (Cardiff, 1998), pp. 407-29. There is still also some material of value in P. J. Madgwick, Non Griffiths & Valenè Walker (eds), *The Politics of Rural Wales: a Study of Cardiganshire* (London, 1973). Most of the material in the early paragraphs of this article is derived from these sources.

² Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Cardiganshire politics: the Liberal ascendancy, 1885-1923', *Ceredigion*, Vol. 5, no. 2 (1967), pp. 337-38, re-printed in his *Modern Wales: Politics, Places and People* (Cardiff, 1995).

securing re-election and increasing his majority substantially. To achieve these goals, it needed to capture new divisions which had previously lain beyond its reach. Nationally, the Labour campaign focussed primarily on a transport plan to integrate rail and road transport, an ambitious house building programme (two planks of especial relevance to Cardiganshire), and the re-nationalisation of the steel industry, the most left-wing of the party's policies in its 1966 manifesto. The party faced the difficult task of increasing the majority of the government of the day. It succeeded beyond all expectations, increasing its majority to no fewer than 97 seats on a national swing of 2.7 per cent, second only to the landslide victory scored by Clement Attlee in 1945. In Wales, where the Labour Party contested every seat, it won a massive 61 per cent of the popular vote, a total of 836,100 (an increase of some 26,000 on its total poll in October 1964). One of its most sensational victories in the whole of the UK was Cardiganshire, a seat never previously held by the Labour Party.

The roots of the Labour Party in Cardiganshire extended back to the early years of the twentieth century. There were a number of trades union groups in the county before the end of the nineteenth century, a North Cardiganshire Trades Union Council was established in October 1912, and a 'Labour' candidate was first adopted for a local election at Aberystwyth in November 1913. Socialist activity in the county was stimulated by industrial unrest on the eve of the First World War and by the rapid escalation which occurred in the levels of food prices in the wake of the outbreak of 'total war'. These pressures led to the establishment of the Aberystwyth Co-operative Society at the beginning of 1915, of a large number of branches of the farm workers' union throughout the duration of the war and eventually a Cardiganshire Labour Party in the high summer of 1918. The last named was the direct result of pressure from the local trades council, the Revd T. E. Nicholas ('Niclas y Glais'), the notable pacifist and socialist Congregationalist minister based at Llangybi and Llanddewi Brefi, and John Davies, west Wales organizer of the agricultural workers' union, who operated from Llangeitho. That the new constitution of the Labour Party, adopted in June 1918, with its centre piece the ambitious policy document *Labour and the New Social Order*, should have seen a local party established in remote rural Cardiganshire so promptly was a considerable achievement.

When the elevation to the peerage in the 1921 New Year's Honours List of the long serving Liberal MP M. L. Vaughan Davies, squire of Plas Tanybwllch near Aberystwyth, led to an intensively fought by-election campaign in the county in February, contested by two Liberal candidates, serious consideration was given in local Labour circles to the nomination of a candidate, but it was felt that the prospects of success were very remote and that many Socialists in the county felt a firm commitment to supporting W. Llewelyn Williams, the independent Liberal candidate.³ No Labour candidate had surfaced in the county in the general elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924, but a sense of impatience had clearly grown up in Labour circles within the county by 1925, reflected in the setting up of a Labour Party branch at Aberystwyth and in moves to put up a candidate at the next general election, widely expected to take place in the late spring of 1929. It seems probable that simple lack of resources was primarily responsible for the failure to nominate a Labour candidate in the 'We Can Conquer Unemployment' general election of 30 May 1929, but in the following autumn John Lloyd Jones, an Ebbw Vale schoolmaster, was selected to contest the next general election which would follow the fall of Ramsay MacDonald's second minority Labour government. In the ensuing October 1931 poll, Jones polled 6361 votes, 24 per cent of those cast, a result viewed with gratification in local Labour circles.

³ On this contest, see J. Graham Jones, 'Every vote for Llewelyn Williams is a vote against Lloyd George', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 37 (Winter 2002-2003), pp. 3-9.

From this point onwards the Labour Party had put up candidates in every parliamentary election in Cardiganshire, and its candidates had included former Liberal Ronw Moelwyn Hughes in 1935, university academic Iwan Morgan in 1945 and 1950, and prominent Carmarthenshire councillor Mrs Loti Rees Hughes in 1959. Although Mrs Hughes had fought a spirited campaign and had genuine (if unrealistic) hopes of winning the seat, at this point it seemed that the sitting Liberal MP Roderic Bowen, veteran of 1945, was very securely entrenched in his Cardiganshire citadel, widely viewed as the most secure Liberal seat in the whole of the United Kingdom.⁴ The social and political context of the new decade – the 1960s – however was strikingly different. Both the Liberal Party and Roderic Bowen, apparently rooted in the past, seemed unable or unwilling to adjust and respond to the changed conditions and their novel challenges. The nonconformist ethos and related temperance issues seemed of minimal importance to the new generation. The traditional 'Welsh Sunday' was slipping away. There was a much greater awareness of developments in British political life and at the same time the emergence of distinct local and regional problems. The question of the re-organisation of Welsh local government and repeated calls for a Mid-Wales Development Corporation commanded attention. The enforcement of the infamous 1963 'Beeching axe' meant that the all important Aberystwyth-Carmarthen railway line ceased to carry passengers from February 1965. Rumours intensified locally that the future of the Aberystwyth-Shrewsbury rail link also lay in jeopardy. During 1963 Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg, established only the previous year, grabbed the headlines with its earliest high profile public protests – blocking the traffic from crossing Trefechan bridge near Aberystwyth and covering the main post office in the town centre with posters and stickers demanding official recognition for the Welsh language. The marked expansion in the numbers of hours of Welsh language television broadcasting also led to heated protests from the English speaking majority that they were being bombarded with programmes in a language which they simply could not understand.

In the new decade veteran Liberal MP Roderic Bowen seemed something of an anachronism who was unwilling to adjust his style of representation.⁵ Ever since his first election to the House of Commons back in 1945 he had continued to build up an extensive bar practice based in far away south Wales, and had accepted a succession of prestigious legal positions including Recorder of Cardiff in 1950 and Recorder of Merthyr Tydfil in 1953. Rarely did he appear at functions in Cardiganshire or hold constituency 'surgeries', correspondence was neglected and his attendance and voting records at Westminster were generally unimpressive. As each general election campaign approached, rumours were initiated by the other political parties that Bowen was likely to retire from parliament in order to devote all his time to his legal career, clearly his first love. By the early 1960s dissatisfaction with Roderic Bowen's attitude and record increased dramatically, and county Socialists sensed the wind of change as the prospects of a Labour government at Westminster grew ever more likely. Their spirits had been buoyed up by the lively candidature of Mrs Loti Rees Hughes in 1959 and by the decision to purchase premises at 4, Bridge Street, Aberystwyth, as new party offices known as 'Neuadd Llafur'. In the general election of October 1964 the local situation was transformed by the nomination of a Conservative candidate for the first time since 1950. In a closely fought four-cornered contest, Bowen held on, but his majority was dramatically slashed to 2219 votes.⁶

⁴ There is a full analysis of this contest in J. Graham Jones, 'The Cardiganshire election of 1959', *Ceredigion*, Vol. 12, no. 2 (1994), pp. 84-105.

⁵ On Bowen, see J. Graham Jones, ' "The Young Upstart": Dr E. Roderic Bowen (1913-2001)', *Ceredigion* Vol. 14, no. 3 (2003), pp. 71-90. A rather different version appeared in J. Graham Jones, 'Biography: "Grimond's rival", Captain E. Roderic Bowen MP', *Journal of Liberal Democrat History* 34/35 (Spring/Summer 2002), pp. 26-34.

⁶ *Cambrian News*, 16 and 23 October 1964.

From this point on the Labour Party could scent powerfully the prospect of victory in Cardiganshire and was thus determined to select the strongest possible candidate. Its choice in September 1965 eventually fell on D. Elystan Morgan, a native of the county who enjoyed a strong network of family connections in the north of the county, but one who was a very recent convert to the ranks of the Labour Party from Plaid Cymru. Morgan had been born at Llandre in 1932, the son of the distinguished Welsh poet Dewi Morgan, and had been educated at Ardwyn Grammar School, Aberystwyth where he had become a member of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru in 1946. He had then read law at the local university college, had enthusiastically become fully involved in the machinations of college politics, and had served as president of the university's debates union. In 1954 Elystan Morgan became articled to a firm of Wrexham solicitors, and in the following January, just after celebrating his twenty-second birthday, he was chosen as the Plaid Cymru candidate for Wrexham. He fought impressive contests at Wrexham in a by-election in March 1955 and in the general elections of May 1955 and October 1959. In 1962 he had succeeded party president Gwynfor Evans as the party's candidate for Merioneth where he stood in the general election of October 1964.

After standing on four occasions as a parliamentary candidate for Plaid Cymru, Morgan began to ponder seriously his political future. By the beginning of 1965 he had become convinced that his party had seemed to have reached a plateau in its electoral development and that his political ambitions as a nationalist could best come to fruition within the Labour Party. Initially, however, he was persuaded by Gwynfor Evans and other elder statesmen within Plaid Cymru to re-consider. After all, Elystan Morgan was widely viewed as one of the party's younger rising stars, perhaps the most likely successor to Evans when he eventually chose to retire as party president. Morgan and Evans shared a close personal rapport and their political philosophies converged. Many felt that Morgan had consciously modelled himself on Evans. It seemed at the beginning of 1965 that Morgan had been persuaded to remain true to Plaid Cymru, but during the following August in a surprise move he announced that he had resolved to join the Labour Party – to the intense chagrin of Gwynfor Evans and other senior figures within Plaid Cymru.⁷ Although he had just 'defected' from Plaid Cymru to join the Labour Party, it was widely anticipated that he was likely to stand as a Labour parliamentary candidate at the next general election which was generally expected to take place during 1966 because of the tiny overall majority of the Wilson government elected in October 1964. A small number of by-election reversals would have destroyed this majority completely. From the outset Cardiganshire and Merionethshire (where the sitting Labour MP T. W. Jones had already announced his intention to retire from parliament at the next dissolution) were named as the most likely constituencies to adopt Elystan Morgan.

In September Labour prospects in Cardiganshire were given a wholly unexpected boost when Roderic Bowen accepted the vacant position of Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons. His decision turned many Liberal supporters in Cardiganshire against their MP who had seemed to be deliberately keeping in office a shaky Labour government by yielding to pressure from a persuasive, silvery tongued Harold Wilson.⁸ It was thus regarded as essential for the Cardiganshire Labour Party to adopt the strongest possible candidate to oppose Bowen who now suddenly looked even more vulnerable than previously, put very much on the defensive by the course of events. The situation in the county was especially sensitive as an approach had already been made to the Revd D. Ben Rees, a native of Llanddewi Brefi and a lifelong Labour supporter who was a minister at Abercynon in south Wales. Rees had expressed a keen interest in the vacant candidature and had allowed his name to go forward.⁹ It is evident that intense pressure was put on Rees to withdraw his name, although he did so reluctantly:

⁷ Gwynfor Evans, 'Ymddatodiad cenedlaetholwr: Mr Elystan Morgan a Phlaid Cymru' (unpublished typescript).

⁸ See Jones, 'Young Upstart'.

⁹ National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW) MS 21, 806E, ff. 9-11, Howard C. Jones, Secretary of the Aberystwyth Labour Party, to Revd D. Ben Rees, [June 1965]; Rees to Jones, 26 and 30 June 1965.

I do this with regret, but by doing so, giving you a chance as a Branch to submit another name to the Selection Committee. During the last few weeks I have been speaking to some of the most prominent members of the Labour Party in Cardiganshire, and they have been honest enough to state quite categorically that it would be better for the Party if I did not stand for selection. I believe in listening to advice – though it is hard when you have been a socialist since your schooldays and have worked diligently in the Labour Movement in Cardiganshire. But I am extremely grateful to the Aberystwyth Party for honouring and putting trust in one who has tried in manifold ways to propagate Socialism. But perhaps a chance will come sometime again.¹⁰

It would appear that Revd Rees had been told by Richard R. Ll. Jones, a former president of the Cardiganshire Labour Party, that, had he been nominated, his candidature would have given rise to 'certain religious prejudices' in the county which would have imperilled his prospects at the polls.¹¹

Within just three days of Ben Rees's magnanimous gesture, an approach had been made to Elystan Morgan.¹² Morgan was flattered by the proposal and allowed his name to go forward. But the unfortunate, even underhand, course of events led to profound misgivings and some rancour in the ranks of the Cardiganshire Labour Party. In November Elystan Morgan was duly nominated by a substantial majority of the delegates over Dr Ambrose Lloyd, a general practitioner at Lampeter.

The local issues on which the next general election campaign would be fought were clear long before the dissolution of parliament in March 1966: the proposal that a new town should be established in mid-Wales; the on-going thorny problem of rural depopulation; the recent closure of the Aberystwyth-Carmarthen railway link; and the need for improved technical education in the county. The termination of the highly cherished railway link was a especially difficult and contentious issue. At the end of January 1965 the South Wales Traffic Commissioners, meeting at Swansea, rejected totally the heated protestations and submissions running to more than six hours, from the Cardiganshire County Council and the Aberystwyth Town Council, and made arrangements for a replacement enhanced bus service to operate between the two key towns. The railway service duly ceased operation at the end of February. Within months there was informed conjecture, nourished by an announcement from British Rail, that the future of the Aberystwyth-Shrewsbury railway service was also under review.¹³

Discussion on the possible creation of a 'new town' in mid-Wales to stem the serious problem of rural depopulation had also continued throughout the year. When the matter had been discussed at a meeting of the County Council in late February, there was a clear divergence of opinion. Some members argued that the creation of a new town would much alleviate the depopulation problem, others insisted that it would do but little to restrict the number of young people leaving Cardiganshire to seek employment in Welsh towns and across the border. The fear was voiced that 'an "alien population" from the Midland towns would be attracted' to Cardiganshire by the establishment of a new town – 'This could well mean the death knell to Welsh customs and the Welsh way of life'. These deliberations took place in the wake of the publication of an official report on depopulation in mid-Wales.¹⁴ Within a month the Liberal Party

¹⁰ NLW MS 21, 806E, f. 19, Rees to Jones 'and Friends', 11 September 1965.

¹¹ Jones, 'Labour Party', p. 160.

¹² NLW MS 21, 806E, ff. 21-24, Howard Jones to Elystan Morgan, 14 September 1965 (draft).

¹³ *Cambrian News*, 22 January and 18 June 1965.

¹⁴ *Cambrian News*, 26 February 1965: 'Town and Country Notes'.

had made a distinctive contribution to the on-going debate with the publication of a draft policy document 'Blue-print for Mid Wales', co-authored by Emlyn Hooson, since May 1962 the Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire and Roderic Bowen's only Welsh colleague in the House of Commons.¹⁵ This foreshadowed the publication in July of a considered plan for mid-Wales, with suggestions for the rejuvenation of the economy and the retention of agriculture as its basic industry.¹⁶ The plan revolved around three main themes – the establishment of a Rural Development Corporation to build up existing towns; a radical overhaul of rural transport facilities, including the construction of trunk roads linking north and south Wales, and Aberystwyth and Shrewsbury; and the expansion of Aberystwyth under the Towns Act to a population of at least 60,000.¹⁷

Roderic Bowen's record as an MP also came in for close scrutiny, especially in the wake of his acceptance of the position of Deputy Speaker of the House in October. An angry correspondent in the columns of the *Cambrian News*, surveying Cardiganshire's long-term depopulation problem and Bowen's alleged inability or unwillingness to contribute to tackling the issue, summed up the prevailing mood in the county, 'It is grossly unfair to his county that he should have time to pay attention to his legal business whilst Wales and Cardiganshire is dying. An MP's job is full time, & especially so under the circumstances existing in Cardiganshire'.¹⁸ The county Liberal Association spared no pains to portray Bowen's new position as 'a great personal honour' for the veteran MP. Alderman W. Morgan Davies of Tregaron, the association's president, emphasised that, although Bowen would henceforth be unable to participate in parliamentary debates or vote in divisions, his role as a constituency MP would be totally unchanged. During the very week that the Cardiganshire Socialists announced the adoption of Elystan Morgan as its prospective candidate, the organisation committee of the county Liberal Association issued a statement:

Mr Roderic Bowen will continue to serve Cardiganshire as faithfully as ever and his increased political stature will enable him to do so all the more effectively. We unanimously endorse his action and wish him well. His appointment has brought distinction to him, to our Association, to the county as a whole and to the Liberal Party. We are delighted that both sides of the House of Commons, the Government and the Opposition alike, have unanimously indicated their great confidence in his capabilities and integrity and that he has been prepared to answer this call to public service, made by the Government and the Opposition, despite the personal sacrifice involved.¹⁹

The question of the merits or demerits of Bowen's acceptance of office was keenly debated in the county during the ensuing winter and spring. At the beginning of February Elystan Morgan, a wily political operator, told a meeting at Cardigan that the county had been effectively 'disenfranchised' by Bowen's contentious decision. Responding to an unwise, almost smug, statement from the veteran Liberal MP that he was now 'leaving the hurly-burly of party politics' to occupy the Speaker's seat on occasion, Morgan asserted, 'Great issues affecting the future of Wales and Britain are now being decided and it is imperative that the county should have a full voice in their deliberation'.²⁰ Bowen and his local party were clearly severely rattled by the on-going attacks. Responding to repeated suggestions that, in his acceptance of office, he had acted either to help the Labour government or the Conservative opposition,

¹⁵ *Cambrian News*, 26 March 1965.

¹⁶ H. E. Hooson and G. Jenkins, *The Heartland: A Plan for Mid-Wales* (London, 1965).

¹⁷ There is material on the formulation of the plan in the NLW, Lord Hooson Papers, box 42.

¹⁸ *Cambrian News*, 15 October 1965: correspondence column: 'An MP's Record'.

¹⁹ *Cambrian News*, 12 November 1965.

²⁰ *Cardigan and Tivyside Advertiser*, 5 February 1966.

he responded indignantly: 'I wasn't helping either. In fact I was helping to see that the machinery of Parliament worked'. In response to accusations that his work as a constituency MP would inevitably suffer as a result of taking the new position in the House, Bowen retorted, 'I have the usual – perhaps I can say more than usual – access to Ministers in relation to the problems concerning Cardiganshire'.²¹

A series of events was hastily organized by the Aberystwyth Labour Party to enable Morgan to become better acquainted with the membership of the party.²² Within a month the new prospective candidate had launched his pre-election campaign with a vigorous speech at Cardigan in which he railed passionately against the social consequences of the woeful lack of local employment opportunities. He commended the Wilson government's National Plan for regional regeneration and the Agriculture Bill then before parliament. Morgan shared the platform with John Morris, Labour MP for Aberavon and parliamentary secretary to the Minister of Power, who underlined the vital role of the embryonic Welsh Office set up the previous year.²³ Morgan was hailed as 'the most able and politically knowledgeable' Labour candidate in Cardiganshire 'for decades'. The bandwagon of support was rapidly gathering momentum. Goronwy O. Roberts, minister of state at the Welsh Office, addressed a conference at Aberystwyth, and Jim Griffiths, the Charter Secretary of State for Wales, spoke at Lampeter. An All-Wales rally held at Newtown and addressed by Prime Minister Harold Wilson was attended by a convoy of delegates from Aberystwyth branch of the Cardiganshire Labour Party.²⁴

As 1966 began, election fever was very much in the air in Cardiganshire as elsewhere as it became ever more apparent that the beleaguered Wilson government, with its minuscule overall majority in the Commons, could not cling to office for very much longer. Early in the new year the Aberystwyth Labour Party adopted as an election issue the need to re-open the railway line between Aberystwyth and Carmarthen, appealing to Barbara Castle, the Minister of Transport, that the track should not be dismantled – amidst rumours that the Transport Commission was considering the sale of land adjoining the railways to local landowners. Such a campaign gripped the popular imagination locally following the hugely unpopular closure of the line as a result of the infamous 'Beeching axe' in 1963.²⁵

After Prime Minister Harold Wilson had decided formally to go to the county on 31 March, an intensive campaign clearly lay in prospect in Cardiganshire. There was a general feeling in the country at large as the general election campaign got underway that the outgoing Wilson government, elected less than eighteen months earlier, had been fatally hampered by its tiny overall majority in the Commons and was thus incapable of introducing its intended legislative programme. 'To support Wilson – elect Morgan' was the slogan of the Labour campaign in Cardiganshire which focussed primarily on the well worn inter-related themes of the chronic lack of light industry in the county, the resultant ever increasing rural depopulation and loss of young people, a low level of income per head of population and the generally sub-standard road and rail facilities in the county. Elystan Morgan's personal election manifesto or address advocated the following remedies: advance factories built by the government for letting to suitable tenants; apprenticeship facilities for young people sponsored by the Board of Trade; increased government expenditure on road improvements; to attract private industry to Cardiganshire through the Labour Party's plan to revive Wales as a development area; and schemes for developing upland areas under the Welsh Rural Development Board:

²¹ *Cambrian News*, 28 January 1966.

²² NLW MS 21, 806E, f. 39, circular letter from Howard C. Jones, secretary, to the membership of the Aberystwyth Labour Party.

²³ *Western Mail*, 6 December 1965.

²⁴ *Newsletter of the Cardiganshire Labour Party*, November 1965.

²⁵ *Western Mail*, 4 February 1966; *Liverpool Daily Post*, 4 February 1966

LLAIS CADARN I'R SIR YN Y SENEDD
 IT'S TIME FOR A CHANGE IN CARDIGANSHIRE –
 VOTE FOR ELYSTAN MORGAN
 A TRUE SON OF CARDIGANSHIRE ²⁶

At his adoption meeting at Aberaeron on 13 March Morgan underlined the need for 'more than sentiment' to retain the young people of Cardiganshire within the county as he presented alarming statistics relating to the outward migration of young people: fully a half, he claimed, of those had left the county by the age of 21, and no fewer than two-thirds by the age of 28. A dynamic Socialist administration would, he asserted, turn this tragic situation around by channelling industrial development into Cardiganshire, while 'the high priests of Toryism' considered political planning 'anathema to their political beliefs'. The election of a Labour MP for Cardiganshire would be a highly symbolic gesture, it would constitute 'an act of reinvigorating the aspirations of the county, a triumph of the decisive realism of today over dreams of an age that was dead. Cardiganshire must say to herself that the hope for the future must replace pity for the past'. At the adoption meeting, the party's county president, D. J. Davies of Panteryrod, Llwynceilyn, who had actually stood as the Labour candidate in the county in 1964, emphasised the county's need for 'the services of a full-time MP'. During Roderic Bowen's long tenure of the constituency, Cardiganshire, he insisted, 'through lack of proper representation at Westminster, had been allowed to drift into the backwaters of progress'. ²⁷

As a result of the substantial diminution in Roderic Bowen's majority in October 1964, Cardiganshire was viewed as a crucial marginal 'hot seat' characteristic of the kind of constituency which the Labour Party desperately needed to capture to ensure an effective working majority at Westminster. Hence the county was bombarded with political 'big guns' on a scale never previously witnessed locally. Elystan Morgan's campaign was buttressed by visits from Lord Champion, Jim Griffiths, John Morris, Ifor Davies and Desmond Donnelly. ²⁸ In a powerful eve-of-poll message, Morgan declared that the very long period of Liberal representation meant that Cardiganshire had been 'hidden in obscurity', 'belong[ing] neither to Government nor Opposition'. The course of the election campaign had revealed 'a desire to see Cardiganshire take her rightful place in the politics of Wales and Britain'. ²⁹

Four candidates sought the support of the electors of Cardiganshire in 1966. In May 1965 the county Conservative Association, encouraged by its poll of 5897 votes in October 1964 (the first occasion it had ever put up a candidate since the general election of February 1950), nominated John Stradling Thomas, the son of T. R. Thomas, a local veterinary surgeon, and the Tory candidate for Aberavon in 1964. ³⁰ The Plaid Cymru candidate was E. G. Millward, a native of Cardiff, a Welsh learner, a lecturer in the Welsh Department at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, and a hard working local councillor. It was his party's aspiration that Millward would now be able to build upon the solid base of support built up by Dr Gareth Evans in 1959 and 1964. On all sides, however, it was agreed that the 1966 contest in Cardiganshire was manifestly a two-horse race where the outcome could well be determined by complex patterns of tactical voting and cross voting. Would Elystan Morgan's very recent 'defection' from Plaid Cymru to the Labour Party affect the levels of support for these two political parties? The crucial

²⁶ *Cambrian News*, 25 March 1966.

²⁷ *Cambrian News*, 18 March 1966.

²⁸ See *Cambrian News*, 4 – 25 March 1966; election address of D. Elystan Morgan, March 1966.

²⁹ *Cambrian News*, 1 April 1966.

³⁰ *Cambrian News*, 28 May 1965.

question was whether the county's traditional Liberalism would enable Roderic Bowen to hang on or whether Elystan Morgan could muster sufficient support to oust him. Bowen, who described himself as a 'progressive anti-Socialist', spent much of his campaign defending his attendance and voting records in the House of Commons and attempting to justify his acceptance of the position of Deputy Speaker of the House the previous autumn: 'In making allegations about my attendance record there are some people who know fulwell that they are spreading false rumours, and some gullible people have swallowed the lies'.³¹

Cardiganshire was indeed at a political 'crossroads' at a momentous point in the history of the Labour Party. On the eve of the poll, the staunchly pro-Liberal *Cambrian News*, clearly alarmed at the prospect of a Socialist gain, described the local campaign as 'one of the most bewildering to the electors we have ever had'. 'The campaign', it went on, 'particularly between the heads of the two main parties [Harold Wilson and Ted Heath], has slunk to a slanging match of extravagant claims and petty counter claims with so many astronomical sums of expenditure mentioned and so many promises held out of creating a Utopia that the whole thing seems to have lost touch with reality'.³² At the end of the day the outcome was:

D. Elystan Morgan	Labour	11,302	37.1%
Roderic Bowen	Liberal	10,779	35.4%
John Stradling Thomas	Conservative	5,893	19.4%
E. G. Millward	Plaid Cymru	2,469	8.1%
Labour majority		523	1.7%

Elystan Morgan's majority of 523 votes was slim but comfortable. He had undoubtedly been a strong candidate who had won over an instantaneous personal following in the county by sheer ability, political acumen and a network of family links in north Cardiganshire. He was well known in the county and generally highly respected. He could claim that his family had farmed in the area for fully 400 years. He could speak exceptionally well in both Welsh, his mother tongue, and in English. He had stood in a constituency where kinship, neighbourliness, friendship and personal and community service were still very highly regarded. He was widely considered to have the potential to become an excellent constituency MP, fully sensitive to the needs and difficulties of his constituents – in such striking contrast to the remote, often absentee Roderic Bowen who clearly considered politics a second career, subservient to his wide ranging legal duties.

Although Morgan had joined the Labour Party as recently as August 1965, many Plaid Cymru sympathisers in the county seem to have voted Labour in 1966, forcing E. G. Millward, a potentially strong Plaid Cymru candidate, to forfeit his deposit with only 2429 votes (8.1 per cent), a drop of 800 on the total polled by Dr Gareth Evans in 1964 and a drop of more than 1400 on Evans's vote in 1959, the first time the party had ever nominated a candidate in the constituency. Although veteran Plaid Cymru president Gwynfor Evans (who had once considered Elystan Morgan one of his natural successors) and senior party mandarins had clearly abhorred Morgan's decision to change party the previous summer,³³ many party activists in Cardiganshire appear to have supported Morgan in 1966. Notably intensive Labour pre-election and election campaigns had been waged throughout Aberystwyth, where Labour

³¹ *Cambrian News*, 25 March and 1 April 1966.

³² *Cambrian News*, 1 April 1966.

³³ See the reflections in Evans, 'Ymddatodiad cenedlaetholwr'.

strength was focussed, including at the university where dozens of Labour students canvassed enthusiastically for many weeks. Media support had also contributed to the outcome of the poll. 'Who would have suspected', asked the strongly pro-Liberal *Cambrian News*, 'that there were so many thankless and thoughtless former supporters ready to succumb to insidious propaganda?'.³⁴ Roderic Bowen's personal reaction to his defeat was eminently sensible:

The main lesson for us Liberals is that electioneering today demands detailed, dedicated work on district level well before polling day and that the goodwill, energy and enthusiasm of a small band of workers is no substitute for the professional approach. In some districts our organization was good thanks to the magnificent exertions of our supporters. In others it was very varied, and there is no doubt that, bearing in mind the long run of Liberal victories in the past, too much was taken for granted on this occasion.³⁵

In a sense the Labour victory in Cardiganshire in 1966 was the (perhaps inevitable) culmination of a trend which had begun in rural north and west Wales ever since the Second World War. The Labour Party had captured Caernarfonshire in 1945, Conwy and Pembrokeshire in 1950, Anglesey and Merioneth in 1951, and Carmarthenshire in a by-election in 1957. The general election of March 1966, when the party captured a record thirty-two Welsh constituencies (including wins at Cardiganshire, Monmouth, Conway and Cardiff North) represented the high water-mark of Labour ascendancy in Wales.³⁶ The 1966 total was a considerable advance on the Labour total in previous successful campaigns: twenty-five seats in 1945, and twenty-seven in 1959. As the party thus mopped up the divisions of rural Wales, previously the most solid bastion of Liberalism in the whole of the United Kingdom, it tapped the Liberal tradition, projecting an increasingly progressive, radical and modernizing image, ever more credible and electable.³⁷ Throughout Britain the Labour Party in 1966 had captured eleven seats which it had never held previously, even in the Socialist high-tide of 1945. Two of these were in Wales – Cardiganshire and Monmouth.³⁸ There had been an increase of 26,000 in the total Labour poll throughout Wales, although interestingly there had been a slight fall in the average percentage poll of individual Labour candidates in Wales – from 80.1 per cent in 1964 to 78.9 per cent in 1966.³⁹

For the Liberal Party, nationally and in Wales, the loss of Cardiganshire was a grievous blow at a time when the party was experiencing a modest revival from its doldrums period in the mid-1950s when the party had held no more than six seats in the whole of the United Kingdom, three of these in Wales. Carmarthenshire had fallen to a Labour candidate, Lady Megan Lloyd George, in a by-election in 1957. Now Cardiganshire, too, had gone the same way, leaving Emlyn Hooson in Montgomeryshire as the only remaining Liberal MP in the whole of Wales. Cardiganshire had been a Liberal held constituency since time immemorial, held continuously by the party since 1880. Rod Bowen had been elected there in six general elections. The change of representation in Cardiganshire in March 1966 typified a much broader transformation in Welsh political life. Elystan Morgan, a lawyer, a native Welsh speaker, a graduate of

³⁴ *Cambrian News*, 8 April 1966.

³⁵ *Cambrian News*, 8 April 1966.

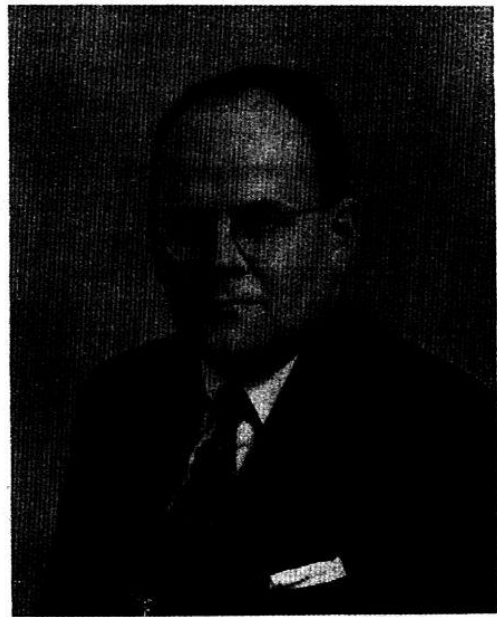
³⁶ The point is made in Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Leaders and led in the Labour movement: the Welsh experience', *Llafur*, Vol. 6, no. 3 (1994), pp. 116-17.

³⁷ See the party's reflections in NLW, Labour Party (Wales) Archives, Vol. 11, p. 156, executive committee minutes, 18 April 1966; NLW MS 21. 806E, f. 47, Cliff Prothero, Cardiganshire election agent, to Howard C. Jones, 1 April 1966.

³⁸ 38 See D. E. Butler and Anthony King, *The British General Election of 1966* (London, 1966), pp. 260-61.

³⁹ NLW, Labour Party (Wales) Archives, Vol. 11, p. 156, executive committee minutes, 18 April 1966

21 Years' Service for "ALL the People"



RODERIC BOWEN, Q.C., M.A., LL.B.

VOTE FOR
BOWEN
THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE

Aberystwyth, with strong nationalist leanings, would undoubtedly have been an instinctive Liberal in the inter-war years and earlier. Morgan's political career thus readily invites comparison with Goronwy O. Roberts, who had captured Caernarfonshire in 1945, and Cledwyn Hughes who had, at the third dogged attempt, ousted Lady Megan in Anglesey in 1951. All three politicians were Welsh-speaking radicals with a nationalistic outlook as a major strand in their socialism, and they were thus capable of promoting Labour's new image as a Welsh party of modernization. After the Welsh Office had been set up in 1964, it was a much easier task to promote new policies sympathetic to Welsh sentiment. On a broader Liberal canvass Bowen's loss of Cardiganshire was counterbalanced somewhat by four striking Liberal gains in 1966, among them Colne Valley (Richard Wainwright), North Cornwall (John Pardoe) and Cheadle (Dr Michael Winstanley).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ *Liberal News*, 7 April 1966; *The Times*, 1 April 1966, p. 12, col. a; Roy Douglas, *The History of the Liberal Party, 1895-1970* (London, 1971), pp. 282-83.