

## Clement Davies; Triumph and Tragedy. A personal Portrait of the former Liberal Leader<sup>1</sup>. [slide 1]

**Beginnings.** It all began in the village of Llanfyllin, in Montgomeryshire. Nestling in the exquisitely-sculpted, olive and emerald scenery of mid Wales, Llanfyllin in the 1880s would have been a remote and little-known rural settlement, a cluster of small cottages, chapels and pubs around a high street and a horse trough. Shrewsbury was a day's cart ride away. Relatively poor in those days, even by the standards of the Victorian countryside, Montgomeryshire was nevertheless characterized in an article in 1927 as 'Wales in miniature' and its people as "kindly, neighbourly, peace-loving, industrious, religious, musical and literary!"

Clement Edward Davies-Clem, as he was always known-was born in Llanfyllin, on 19 February 1884, into a middle-class family of farmers and auctioneers, living in a small, white-painted home on the high street, called Globe House. [slide 3] His father, Moses was a kindly, gentle-spirited valuer and estate agent, whose experience of having to auction off the assets of local people who had been evicted from their homes gave him a lifelong antipathy towards callous Tory landlords. His wife, Laura, whose ancestor was said to have sat on the Woolsack, was the martinet of the family, very much in command. Each morning, after breakfast, she would read out a passage to the family from a hefty Bible, close the book with a snap and then give the children their marching orders for the day.

The family had a fierce work ethic and unusual intellectual capacity. They were also close, loving, high-spirited and supportive, with a very Victorian sense of duty and conscience. All but one of the children went to university, achieving impressive, sometimes outstanding, results. The eldest son, Hugh, became a successful Harley Street surgeon, David, or Dav as he was known, was to be appointed by Lloyd George as Superintending Valuer for Wales, Hereford and Shropshire. Laura, the eldest daughter, became the first woman graduate in medicine at Edinburgh University, coming top of her academic year.

Clem, the 7<sup>th</sup> and last-born child, went to the local school in the village and then to the Llanfyllin County School, with its cane-wielding headmaster, walking the two miles there and back every day. He showed early signs of academic flair and confidence. When he returned home after school, his mother would often make him recount the main incidents of the day to the patiently-listening family; a practice which no doubt helped shape his formidable memory, but may also have encouraged a certain monologuing tendency! But Clem was naturally talkative and full of energy, and as a boy could be mischievous and cheeky. Entertainments included baiting the local policeman and lamp-lighter, and a riot of adventures with the other village children.

After completing school, Clem helped run the family farm and auction business for a couple of years, before setting his heart on a career as a barrister. This was a bold ambition in those days for a provincial Welsh farm boy, as his brother David ('Dav') pointed out to him, puffing on his pipe as they sat watching the sunset over the Berwyn mountains one evening. The Bar was and remains a fiercely competitive and selective profession. Dav explained that he would need to matriculate and study law at university, and offered to fund the process. And so Clem came to London, studied at a

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction to explain that this is a 'snapshot' of his life, rather than a detached historical analysis, based very much on the stories told me by my father. Clem died when I was two years old, and so I never knew him personally. Yet his presence and influence within our family remained so strong after his death that vivid impressions of him and his talents were left to me. For published historical accounts, I have drawn extensively on Alun Wyburn-Powell's excellent biography of him [slide 2] and Nicholas Shakespeare's enthralling recent study of Churchill's ascent to power in 1940, *Six Minutes in May*.

crammer in Notting Hill Gate, and then passed the entrance exam to Trinity Hall College, Cambridge, [slide 4] having mastered just enough Latin and Greek to do so.

**Cambridge and Lincoln's Inn.** Clem's time at Cambridge, to which he went up in 1904, was to prove the first of his many triumphs. He was sociable enough, mainly keeping the company of fellow Welsh students. He threw himself into university sports, playing rugby, cricket and tennis, and rowing. He joined the Cambridge Union Debating Society, although never found the confidence to speak, once putting his hand up in a debate with absolutely no idea of what he would have said if he had been called on<sup>2</sup>!

It was at academia, though, that Clem truly excelled, competing with some of the brightest students in the country. At the end of his first year, he was awarded a starred First, coming top of all the law students in his year. He had not expected this. When we went to read the results pinned on the university notice board, he did not even glance at the first-class category. Not finding his name on the board, he thought he had failed altogether. He was sitting in the bath back in his room shortly afterwards, in a mood of despair, convinced that it was back to work on the farm for him and an end to his ambitions, when there came a knock on the door. It was his tutor, who had rushed over to congratulate him on his remarkable achievement. When word reached Llanfyllin, they rang the church bells and threw open the pub doors in celebration!

The academic successes continued, with further First Class Honours in his second and third years (reputedly the best results that Trinity Hall law faculty then had on record). In his second year, on top of his routine studies, he entered the competition for the post-graduate Whewell scholarship. Working 20 hours a day, he found himself studying enthralling new subjects, such as historical biography, political philosophy and economics. He was awarded the highest marks of all the students taking part. When asked by one of the Dons how long it had taken him to read Morley's life of Gladstone, he replied 'the whole of a Sunday afternoon, sir'. He was already demonstrating his formidably retentive memory, capacity for unsparing hard work, incisive intellect and fierce determination<sup>3</sup>.

After a post-graduate stint lecturing in law for a year at the University of Wales in Aberystwyth, Clem was called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn (where he eventually became a bencher) in 1909 [slide 5], before moving to London in 1910. He joined Mitre Court chambers (later 4 Essex Court), a leading commercial set in the Temple, and embarked on building what was to become one of the most successful and lucrative practices of his generation. He fought many cases with two of the leading advocates of their time, John Simon and F.E. Smith, both rising stars of the political scene, who became friends and mentors.

**Political Stirrings and Marriage.** Politics were now starting to fascinate him. It was an exciting time to be a Liberal. The old Liberal Party of Gladstone, Bright and Palmerstone, which he had been brought up to believe in so passionately, was once again in vigorous health, energised by its new social-reforming agenda. It had been returned to power in 1906 with one of the largest landslides in British political history. By 1910, with Asquith installed in Ten Downing Street, and Lloyd George as his Chancellor of the Exchequer next door, it was in the middle of the fierce parliamentary struggles over the People's Budget, which laid the foundations of the welfare state, and the Parliament Bill, which was finally to abolish the House of Lords' veto over legislation. [slide 6] These were battles at

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<sup>2</sup> Unlike his son Stanley, who became President of the Cambridge Union when he was up at Trinity Hall, or his grandsons, Christopher and Simon, who both became Oxford Union officers and stood for the Presidency (not against each other!). But modesty prevents me....

<sup>3</sup> When he went down from Cambridge, he was sometimes referred to as the 'Double First with the Devil's own temper!'

least as bitter, convulsive and threatening as those over Brexit in the past 3 years-and in the end-far more dangerous<sup>4</sup>.

Clem was keen to see as much of it all as he could at first hand and sometimes attended all-night sittings of Parliament, occasionally as the sole observer from the gallery. (He could always function on very little sleep). He used to tell a story about joining a gathering of Liberal supporters at the Reform Club in 1910, after the People's Budget had been thrown out by the House of Lords. Asquith spoke first, with great authority and lucidity, and was well and politely received. Then it was Lloyd George's turn. He electrified his audience, finishing with the words: "This budget has been killed stone dead by the House of Lords. But it is in the sure and certain hope of a glorious resurrection!" The room went wild with excitement, with members jumping on chairs, flinging their papers in the air and cheering with abandon.

Clem wanted to play an active part in the elections of 1910. He was even approached by Lloyd George and asked to put his own name forward as a candidate. Although tempted, he decided, on his parents' advice, that he must continue establishing himself professionally and financially first.

In 1912, he met his wife to be, in London, Jano Davies, a successful teacher and school-mistress. [slide 7] Brought up in London, by her fiercely patriotic Welsh doctor father, Morgan Davies, Jano had been to university-a rare step for a young woman in those days-studying classics and languages at Aberystwyth, London University and the Sorbonne in Paris. She could speak and write fluently in English, Welsh, French, Italian and even Latin. She also had a genuine and striking talent for acting. While still at university, she had been offered a leading part in a professional West End play; but her horrified father had refused to countenance it, slamming his fist on the table with the words "My daughter on the stage? Never!"

I remember her as an enchanting, warm-hearted grandmother (as grandsons typically do!), but my mother had more mixed emotions (as daughters-in-law typically do!). For all her charm and poise, she could also be aloof and coldly critical<sup>5</sup>. With a 'will of steel', as my father put it, perhaps even stronger than her husband's, she was to enjoy a range of roles of her own in public life, including High Sheriff of Montgomeryshire. She became an accomplished public speaker, very different in style to her husband. Several attempts were made over the years to persuade her to stand in her own right as an MP, but she was never seriously tempted.

Clem and Jano's wedding took place at the church of St. Clement Danes in the Strand, in September 1913. Despite the inevitable tensions of a long married life, compounded by family tragedy and the immense pressures of their lives, their relationship remained a strongly committed, symbiotic and in many ways happy one. They were similar personalities and soul-mates, both highly intelligent, emotional and highly-strung, ambitious and driven, who felt that their role in life was to achieve at the highest level, and to lead, guide and help others.

**First World War and Children.** When war broke out in 1914, Clem volunteered for military service, but was promptly snapped up by government, and instructed to join the Admiralty, and later the Board of Trade, as a government official, carrying out secret work on economic warfare and the naval blockade against Germany. Clem and Jano's children were born during these years; David at the end of 1914 and then, successively every two years, Mary, Geraint and Stanley. They were very different, but profoundly close-knit as siblings, and enjoyed an upbringing that was suffused with excitement, drama, emotion and intensity. Eager conversation, theatrical story-telling, laughter and polemical

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<sup>4</sup> There were very clear signs of impending war in Ireland, for example, which erupted at the end of WW1.

<sup>5</sup> When she was critically ill in hospital at the end of her life, my father was sitting next to her, when she took his hand anxiously and-confusing him with her (by then deceased husband), said "Clem-I was too hard, too hard. I am so sorry. " My father (allowing her to think he was Clem) said simply "Jano-you were the rock on which my life was built". She sank back on the pillows, exclaiming 'Thank God!'

debate were constant features of their colourful family life (as they were to be of mine). Stories about Wales abounded, ranging from family dramas, historical events and folk-tales to ancient legends.

[slide 8] David, the eldest son, seemed to be the embodiment of good-nature, responsibility and unselfishness, becoming something of a vicarious father to the other children when Clem was too busy to see them (as he so often was). Mary, their sister, was shy, bookish, highly strung and impulsively generous. Geraint, the third child, was the swashbuckler of the family-bold, fearless, good-looking and irresistibly charming. And lastly there was my father, Stanley, who inherited many of my grandparents' gifts, including his mother's love of language and literature and his father's eloquence, forensic skill and passion for inspiring ideals. Each of Clem's children apart from Stanley was to die in tragic circumstances at the age of 24.

**1920s: Back at the Bar.** As the First World War drew to its grim close, Clem set about re-establishing his interrupted legal career. Harnessing all his drive and energy, he quickly re-built a thriving commercial law practice. [slide 9] He worked relentlessly-as he did throughout life; rising at 5.00am, reaching chambers before 7.00, working flat out through the day at his 'butcher's block' of papers, court hearings and conferences, returning home for a quick supper, and then continuing his paperwork until the early hours. He could tear through as many as 25 briefs and 1000 pages of information in a single day when he had to. He became known as one of the busiest and most highly-paid barristers in his field, earning around £30,000 a year (comfortably over £1 million in today's money). Time off was almost unknown. Even at Christmas, he would only come home in the early hours of Christmas morning, buy up all the unsold toys for his children in a local toy shop which the obliging owner would keep open for him, and then spend much of the night decorating the Christmas tree.

At times, he was so exhausted as he headed for chambers, that he would almost feel tempted to throw himself under a passing bus. But then, as my father told us, in his imagination he would sense his children tugging at his coat tails, urging him on, and he would find the strength to keep going. I once met a clerk from his old chambers, who described him as the hardest working barrister he had ever known. In addition to his energy and work ethic, he had the persuasiveness and charisma to win the most challenging cases, including one which paid him the largest brief fee ever thought to have been earned on a single case (3,000 guineas). The famous Irish advocate and political activist Edward Carson, QC, came to congratulate him, crying "Let me at him!" as he strode into chambers. "I held the record for thirty years" he said, "but now you have beaten me!"

Clem and Jano were able to enjoy the proceeds of their success, notwithstanding the unrelenting pressure. In 1920, they bought a large house in Kensington, at 11 Vicarage Gate, spread over six spacious floors, with half a dozen staff<sup>6</sup>. [slide 10] As well as being a happy family home, the house soon became a focus for London Welsh life, attracting a circle of writers, dramatists, artists and musicians. Jano loved to organize concerts in their magnificent drawing room on the first floor, creating something of a *salon* where their friends and contacts (including Lloyd George and other prominent political and business figures) could meet, talk and be entertained.

A second home in the country followed a few years later. [slide 11] Plas Dyffryn-meaning valley hall-was a large early eighteenth-century house on the edge of the village of Meifod in Montgomeryshire, close to Llanfyllin and Welshpool. This became my grandfather's constituency base for the rest of his life, and a focal point for his family for three generations. Flanked by fields, orchards and a sweeping drive lined with majestic copper-beech trees, that would dapple you with golden light on a sunny afternoon, with rickety ancient stables and a 17<sup>th</sup> century coach house at the rear, and a steep, wooded

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<sup>6</sup> My father once counted 93 steps on the staircase from top to bottom! Once of his favourite games as a child was to slide all the way down on the bannister. He once fell down the well of the staircase from the very top onto the hallway floor beneath, miraculously sustaining no worse injury than a lifelong fear of heights!

hill behind, it seemed to have an unusually strong personality of its own; exuberant when full of people but melancholy, almost threatening, when empty. It was reminiscent of J.M. Keynes' reference to the 'hag-ridden magic and enchanted woods of Celtic antiquity'<sup>7</sup>.

But let's get back to Clem's career. By 1926, overwork had taken its toll, not aided by a habit he had picked up from ex-officer colleagues of his from the First World War of allowing himself a stiff drink or two to reinforce his efforts. He suffered a nervous break-down from over-work and had to take a full year out, in a state of chronic depression, to recover, while Jano nursed him back to health. He was awarded Silk, without applying for it, while he was away, and so became a King's Counsel in 1926. A flood of congratulations-over 100 letters and telegrams-poured in. [slide 12]

By 1927 he was back to normal and thriving at work once again. He and Jano made a delightful trip to Peru in connection with a case he was fighting. [slide 13] They stayed in the state rooms on the liner, were put up at the palatial Gran Hotel Bolivar in Lima and ferried around town in a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce. It was one of their happiest times together-a 'dream time' in Jano's words. [slide 14]

On their return, Clem was starting to think seriously about entering the political world. The Liberal Party had already been shattered by the protracted rivalry between Asquith and Lloyd George at the end of the First World War, which had torn it in two, reducing its total tally of seats to as few as 40 by 1924. But with his old friend Lloyd George now firmly established as party leader, Clem was hopeful that it might be on its way back to power.

His mind was made up for him the following year when the Liberal candidacy in Montgomeryshire was offered to him by the local Party Association. In his biographer's words, this meant that "a ticket to Parliament was virtually handed to him on a plate". Montgomeryshire was a relatively safe Liberal seat. Jano was initially opposed but Clem, although distraught at the thought of disappointing her, felt it was a step he had to take. It might be his last chance to stand. And he was becoming deeply pre-occupied by the devastating forces unlocked by the Pandora's box of the First World War that were now shredding the fabric of the stable world of his youth-economic collapse and unemployment, political upheaval and revolution, the rise of Communism and Fascism, autarky and the collapse of free trade, mounting international tension, the failures of the League of Nations and isolationism in the United States. He allowed his name to go forward and was duly selected as Liberal candidate. Lloyd George invited Clem and Jano down to his home in Churt to celebrate.

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**1930s: Backbench MP and Unilever.** Clem was first elected to Parliament in the general election of 1929, with a respectable if unremarkable majority of 2,128, becoming MP for Montgomeryshire, a position he was to hold for the next 32 years. His election address carried a personal endorsement from Lloyd George. Sir John Simon came down to speak for him. And so his political career was launched.

In 1930, he formally left the Bar, when he was offered and accepted a main board directorship by his client Unilever, then one of the largest and most successful British businesses in the world. He remained a director and then senior adviser of Unilever, at the epicenter of the company's affairs, for the next 18 years, dividing his working day between its grandiose new building next to Blackfriars Bridge and the House of Commons, further along the Embankment. [slide 15]

Within a year of his election to Parliament, there were signs of a certain disillusion setting in, both with politics in general and with the struggling Liberals. He wrote to one friend to say "I feel that the Liberal Party as a Party is dead! We have neither health nor spirit in us". Apart from its fading fortunes, its leader, Lloyd George, was far from averse to playing politics in an attempt to strengthen

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<sup>7</sup> My brothers and I also adored it as children. It was very sadly sold in the 1970s.

his position at Westminster. Clem was furious one day when Lloyd George, after striking a secret deal with the Labour Party, did a sudden *volte face* over a Coal Mines Bill that he strongly believed in. Clem, who had a fiery temper, went storming round to Lloyd George's house to confront him. He found him standing in a bathroom, slowly washing his hands, deeply pre-occupied. "What's the matter?" Clem asked, completely taken back. "It is these hands of mine" LG replied, still without looking up. "They are getting old. Losing their cunning". "Never!" cried my grandfather, completely charmed, and proving that Lloyd George's hands were losing anything but their cunning!

When the Party then bewilderingly split into three groupings, led by (respectively) Lloyd George, Sir John Simon and Herbert Samuel, Clem affiliated himself with the National Liberals under John Simon. In the election of 1935, thirty three of their MPs were returned, whilst the official Liberals were reduced to a mere 20 seats. Clem was re-elected unopposed in Montgomeryshire. [slide 16]

Clem was generally supportive of the policies of the National Government in the Thirties, as it grappled with the Great Depression at home and the growing menace of Fascism and Communism abroad, but could also be outspoken and critical wherever he saw policy failings or deficiencies. Like so many others, he was appalled by the unemployment, deprivation, poverty and despair which scarred 1930s Britain, and did what he could to fight them. He even employed up to 15 people on the grounds of his constituency home, Plas Dyffryn, carrying out sometimes unnecessary tasks, just to give them something to do.

[slide 17] In 1938, he chaired a famous enquiry into the incidence of tuberculosis in Wales, with all his usual zeal, determined "to shake the country out of its supine acceptance of bad housing, drainage and poverty". Clem and his team made flying visits to schools, hospitals and homes all over Wales, and spent two months taking evidence from witnesses. The final report contained pages of sometimes shocking detail about the extent of rural deprivation. It was outspokenly and impartially critical of government at all levels, fearlessly exposing the failures of duty, callousness, complacency and vested interests that perpetuated the problem. The report attracted huge attention from the national press.

One of the most striking aspects of Clem's time as a backbencher was the influence he exercised amongst leading political figures of the time. He was being drawn into meetings with Lloyd George, Baldwin, Ramsey Macdonald and John Simon before he had even made his maiden speech. This was part of a pattern that continued throughout his political career, a reflection, I believe, of the trust that many decision-makers placed in his judgment and intellect, as well as his integrity and straightforward sense of public duty. He said and did what he believed to be right, with little regard for the personal political consequences. For example, when Stanley Baldwin decided to step down as Tory leader and Prime Minister, in 1936, the first person he consulted was my grandfather, sitting on the lawn at Plas Dyffryn (which he described as 'a gem'). Attlee, Churchill, Eden and Macmillan were to consult him repeatedly during their premierships about critical decisions. Adlai Stevenson, twice Presidential candidate in the 'States in the 1950s, insisted on seeing Clem before anyone else whenever he came to London.

Clem and Jano had by now become prominent Establishment figures. [slide 18] A glamorous dance they threw for David and Mary at the Dorchester was attended by two former Prime Ministers and written up in the Times, Daily Telegraph and Evening Standard. At the end of 1938, Clem embarked for Africa, on a four-month Parliamentary West African Commission, together with a group of other MPs and staff. His fascinating and often startling experiences were written up in a stream of vivid letters back home to his family. He found Latin and Greek history being taught to school children in remote African villages, and met a chieftain who was lamenting the sad decline in his harem from 130 wives to 95! When Clem tuned into his radio in one village, a native woman begged him hysterically to let the poor pygmies out of their box. Bizarre and amusing examples of Pidgin English he came across included "Breeze, he gone went", meaning a flat tyre, and "Kerosene Lamp, him b'long Jesus Christ", meaning the moon!

**Second World War.** On Clem's return to London in 1939, all attention was being absorbed by the collapse of Neville Chamberlain's policy of Appeasement and the seemingly inevitable slide towards war with Germany. Clem had been broadly supportive of Appeasement and the agonized compromises reached at Munich, sharing the widely held view that there was no convincing alternative. By 1939, however, once Hitler had overrun the rump of the dismembered Czechoslovakia, it was clear that the policy had failed. The real turning point for my grandfather came in July 1939, when he chaired a meeting at the Savoy between a group of MPs and a high-ranking Nazi official, called Woltadt, who bluntly demanded that a free hand to control Continental Europe be given to Germany, which in return would respect Britain's imperial possessions around the world. The guests were horrified. Clem concluded that there could no longer be any doubt about Nazi Germany's intentions, and that Chamberlain's handling of the situation was proving disastrously ineffectual. When war was declared later that year, he swung into determined and tireless opposition.

[slide 19] Clem formed and chaired ("vigorously", in Leo Amery's words) an All-Party Action Group, to share views and coordinate activities, which became known as 'the Vigilantes'. This "ginger group", as one member described it, provided a 'springboard from which Clem was rapidly to be thrust into the centre of events'. Its members numbered over 60 MPs, including Amery, Bob Boothby, Duff Cooper, Clement Attlee and Arthur Greenwood. Its activities soon came to focus on opposition to Chamberlain's premiership.

Clem's efforts may have been reinforced by the tragic news that his adored eldest son, David, had been found dead at his desk at work<sup>8</sup>, following an epileptic attack. I sense that a new steely ruthlessness and impatience now entered my grandfather's make-up. Work became a distraction from his personal anguish, and the thought of failure, either by him personally in his objectives, or by the country he loved in standing up to the terrible menace of Nazism, was intolerable. Over the next few months, he launched scathing attacks on the Government's conduct of the war, stating in a letter to Chamberlain that it "has not the resolution, policy or energy...to meet the crisis". Newspapers began to single him out as a threat, one stating that he had "become the devil's own nuisance to the government". In December 1939, he withdrew from the Liberal Nationals, crossing the floor of the House into formal opposition.

[slide 20] The culmination of Clem's efforts-and arguably his finest hour-came at the time of the Norway Debate, in May 1940, the scene of some of the most dramatic events in British parliamentary history. The debate was scheduled, for the 7<sup>th</sup> May, following the Nazis over-running of Norway in a lightning strike which had forced a humiliating retreat by the ill-prepared and organized British forces. Chamberlain's credibility had been steadily draining away, and Clem and the Vigilantes now did everything in their power to force a vote of no-confidence. In the lead up to the debate, Clem had no sleep for 3 days, as he rallied MPs by 'phone and in person, and took part in a whirl of critical discussions. He persuaded Attlee and his colleagues to force a division. When the vote came, Chamberlain's majority fell from 213 to 81, making his resignation inevitable.

His successor at Number Ten, however, was far from a foregone conclusion. [slide 21] The patrician, scholarly and pro-Appeasement Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, enjoyed overwhelming support within the British Establishment, and was quite open about his belief that a negotiated peace with Hitler was the only rational course. Clem, however, was convinced that Churchill was the only possible man for the job. Swapping Halifax for Chamberlain meant, in his view, exchanging 'tweedledum for tweedle-dee', as he said to Dawson of the Times. He again fought tirelessly over the next three days to ensure that Churchill was chosen, arguing, cajoling, seizing the initiative, and spending hours in discussion with Attlee and Greenwood to convince them to withhold their support for anyone

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<sup>8</sup> He was training to be a solicitor at slaughter & May.

else. By 6.00pm on Friday, 10<sup>th</sup> May, Churchill was Prime Minister. “Thank God”, said a colleague of Lord Beaverbrook’s. “Do not thank God”, he replied. “Thank Clem Davies”.

On the following Sunday the Sunday Express published an article entitled ‘Clem the Giant Killer’, describing him as “the man who pulled down Chamberlain and set up Churchill.” Bob Boothby, who saw all these events at first hand, later described him as “one of the architects-perhaps the principal architect-of the Government which saved us from destruction, and then led us to victory”. As he entered the House of Commons on Monday, 13<sup>th</sup> May, he was greeted with cries of ‘Warwick-the King Maker’!

**[slide 22]** Clem was offered a Viscounty by Churchill for his role in these events, and then a junior position in Government, both of which he declined. He wanted to remain in the House of Commons, but with the freedom to speak out as a ‘candid friend’ of the administration. As the war years raged on, he maintained and deepened his niche as a constructive, independent critic of the government, highlighting deficiencies and exhorting ministers to greater effort. One contemporary wrote that ‘the Churchill Government was constantly on the run from the firebrand Clement Davies’.

Clem also found himself collaborating closely at this time with another leading Liberal thinker, William Beveridge. The two of them spent months discussing the social problems and solutions that were to be written up and published in the Beveridge Report in 1942, which became the basis of the 1945 Liberal manifesto and so many of the idealistic reforms of the postwar government.

**[slide 23]** Clem lived largely in the Reform Club during the war years, a few minutes’ walk from Parliament Square, while Jano stayed down in Wales at Plas Dyffryn, then swarming with horses, chickens, pigs and evacuee children from Liverpool. One day, in 1941, a journalist rang Jano and asked if she had any comments on her daughter’s death? It was the first Jano had heard of it. Mary had been working in the army’s Auxillary Territorial Service, where she was, in the words of a friend, “tremendously happy”, when she had somehow come into contact one evening with an uninsulated electric pylon, and been killed instantly. The official and wholly implausible verdict was suicide, a judgment the family always bitterly disputed.

Two years on, tragedy struck again. My grandparents were at Dyffryn for Christmas in 1943. One night, Clem was woken by the sound of carol-singing in the early hours. He came downstairs in his dressing gown, bleary-eyed and irritable, fumbling in his pocket for some coins, when he saw that the two singers were my father and his brother Geraint, then a lieutenant in the Welsh Guards, and back home for Christmas. My father saw Clem’s eyes light up and the tears start to his eyes. They all had a joyful Christmas together. Two months later, Geraint was dead, killed not even in action but in an armoured car that accidentally rolled over during training on Salisbury Plain, crushing its crew. The Last Post was played at his funeral in Meifod Church. Clem stood by the graveside, in the grey winter light, long after everyone had left, repeatedly whispering the words “my beautiful boy”.

The deaths of three of his children and the strains of war eventually wore him down. He was physically debilitated and mentally exhausted for perhaps the next 18 months, and again deeply depressed, writing to Stanley that he had become a “limp, bedraggled soul, battered and bruised”. Yet he gradually recovered his resilience. In the election of 1945 he campaigned with full vigour and a passionate belief in the social reforms that he had helped prescribe in the Beveridge Report. (He fought all his elections with maximum energy, typically accepting 5 or 6 speaking engagements a day). He held on to a clear majority in Montgomeryshire, but the Liberals nationally were routed. Only 12 MPs were returned, a loss of one third of the Party’s seats, including William Beveridge and the Party’s then leader, Archibald Sinclair. Sinclair had lost his seat by a tiny margin and was widely expected to win his way back to Parliament and the leadership in an early by-election. Pending his return, Clem was chosen by the Parliamentary Party as its ‘Chairman’, and so took his place alongside Attlee and Churchill as party leader. **[slide 24]**

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**Liberal Leader**. And so we come to the last chapter of his life, his leadership of the Liberal Party. I propose to deal with this relatively cursorily, since time is short, and this is a personal portrait of my grandfather, rather than a detailed historical analysis. Let me simply highlight certain aspects of it.

The picture in terms of seats is well known. From 12 seats in 1945, the Liberals fell to 9 MPs in the election of 1950 and 6 in 1951. I should say at once that I do not believe that Clem should bear much of the blame for this. Labour won the election of 1945 with its largest ever landslide, 393 seats to the Tories' 213. The political landscape had been transformed. One individual's power to shape events in politics is severely limited when the forces of change are ranged against them. As a political party, the Liberals had torn themselves apart in 1918, and suffered a precipitous and unremitting decline ever since. These results were simply part of a clear, long-term pattern. They were squeezed by the two behemoths of Labour and the Conservatives, in a pincer reinforced by the first-past-the-post voting system, in a way they have never been since. These years was the heyday of the two-party vote in Britain, representing around 96% of the total, a proportion which was to fall consistently from then on. [slide 25]

Clem's principal objective was to keep the Liberal Party alive as a distinctive, independent force in British politics. [slide 26] He was determined to resist the many calls for 'arrangements' or 'accommodations' with other parties (from the likes of of Rab Butler and Lord Hailsham) which he thought might jeopardise or weaken it. "The Liberal Party will not jeopardise its independence or restrict its freedom of action for any price", he wrote in *Liberal News* in 1950. He succeeded in this, and I think deserves great credit for it, given the daunting circumstances he faced and the dedication he brought to bear. He led it through its darkest days for 11 long years. Writers are generally agreed that 1950/1 represented the nadir of the Party's fortunes, and that, by the time Clem stepped down in 1956, a new foundation had been laid from which it was to continue growing steadily in strength over the next 50 years. The recovery began under his leadership.

The difficulties were severe. The party's machinery and infrastructure had fallen to pieces during its decline, its membership and resources hopelessly depleted. It had none of the tools available to a modern political party; no focus groups, spin doctors, policy units or head office command structure. It was all very much down to individual effort. Clem's instinct was simply to fight back, as hard as he could, and find a way through. Behind the scenes, he was sometimes privately pessimistic, calling himself the Omega of the Liberal Party. But publicly he approached the daunting task of leading it with all the fire, energy and passion for its values that he was capable of. This took great courage (a quality revered in our family). My father told me that he set out to speak in every city, town and village in the country while he was leader, keeping the flame burning and winning back support. "We refuse to die", he cried to a cheering Liberal Assembly a Scarborough in 1950. "We are determined to live and fight on...". Clem repeatedly drove himself into the ground in the process, suffering at least three periods of serious illness and a heart attack

A brief word about his so-called 'alcoholism'. This has in my view been hugely exaggerated. Clem was essentially teetotal for many years, but allowed himself isolated bouts of drinking<sup>9</sup> from time to time to relieve the massive pressures under which he placed himself. This occasional indulgence was insignificant compared to the daily dependency on alcohol (or worse) of so many politicians and public figures, not least his friends Winston Churchill and Lord Birkenhead. There is no evidence that it ever significantly impaired his abilities or effected the performance of his responsibilities.

[slide 27] He had the strength of personality, confidence, intellect and vitality needed for the task of leader, despite his age. A prominent QC once told me that Clem had the most remarkable presence he

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<sup>9</sup> whiskey

had ever come across. And he could inspire. I once sat next to a lady at a dinner in his honour, who told me that she had often heard him speak at Party conferences, and found him “utterly inspiring” as he proclaimed “Liberalism for ever!” Emlyn Hooson has described him as a “tremendous mob orator, his style...evoking something of an Old Testament prophet addressing his adoring followers!”

He was certainly a formidable talker and communicator, able to chat to anyone on friendly and engaging terms. He loved to talk and tell stories, and many loved to listen to him (even if he could sometimes be on the long-winded side!)<sup>10</sup>. He had charm and empathy in his make-up, as my mother used to tell me, and a deep vein of good-nature, which informed the idealism of his political beliefs. But he could also be stern and uncompromising in his judgments, particularly of conduct which he thought fell below the very high standards he expected of himself and others. His life was all about duty and public service. Principle and integrity were absolutely non-negotiable. He could so easily have withdrawn from politics into commerce or the House of Lords and a comfortable retirement. My grandmother counted no less than 17 occasions during his career when he turned down a peerage.

His strategy in Parliament was to hold on to the apparatus of a large political party, with Whips’ offices and a Shadow Cabinet, notwithstanding the tiny residue of Liberal MPs. He often managed to secure equal representation with other party leaders at state events and functions, which helped ensure that the Liberal Party’s prominence far outweighed its numerical strength<sup>11</sup>. He was appointed a Privy Councillor in 1947 (to his intense pride), a position which again reinforced the Party’s ability to make its voice heard in the House of Commons.

His approach to party management was-inevitably, given their numbers-to try to build consensus amongst his small but disparate group of MPs, using his charm and fundamental decency to encourage them to cooperate through personal loyalty. He sometimes groaned about the position of “almost supine weakness” this placed him in. There was no mechanism to enforce a party line. His priority was to avoid any further splits of the kind that had broken the Party time and again in the past, although defections inevitably took place as numbers dwindled.

Ideologically, he was unwaveringly true to his old Liberal roots, emphasizing individual freedom and dignity, spiritual over material values, the need for piecemeal reforms to create a more just and compassionate society, but with the state always as the servant of the people, never their master. He took a pragmatic approach to the reforms of the postwar Labour Government, supporting some, opposing others. They were, after all, based on a Liberal blueprint-the Beveridge Report. He threw his full weight behind the creation of the NHS. But he did not believe in excessive state control of the economy and became very critical of Labour’s dogmatic and sweeping use of nationalization to seize its ‘commanding heights’. He was equally critical, of course, of what he saw as the Tories’ readiness to tolerate monopoly structures and market distortions and abuses, and their lack of imagination and energy in forging a better and fairer world after the depredations of war.

Clem was also a deeply-committed internationalist. He was President for many years of the World Parliament Association, a global movement that sought to advance understanding and cooperation between the parliaments of its member countries. For this, which he regarded as one of his finest achievements, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1955, with the support of over 100 parliamentarians. He became almost obsessed with the terrible threat represented by the escalating nuclear arms race between the superpowers at the height of the Cold War, and constantly looked for ways of reducing tension. He was an active supporter of the new State of Israel when it was founded,

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<sup>10</sup> My mother once asked him a question as they set off in the car on a shopping trip from Dyffryn to Welshpool. Two hours later, he was still answering it. My mother had long since forgotten what the question was!

<sup>11</sup> This was not dissimilar to General De Gaulle’s insistence during the war, as the head of his little ‘government in exile’, on being treated as the representative of a great independent power.

especially as the full extent of the horrors of the Holocaust became known<sup>12</sup>, and passionately supported the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, the forerunner of the EEC and EU<sup>13</sup>. Brexit would have broken his heart.

**Churchill's Last Government.** As Churchill formed his last government in 1951, he offered the Liberals a coalition and my grandfather a seat in the Cabinet as Minister for Education. Clem was sorely tempted. For Churchill, it was very much a personal offer, and a payback for 1940. "I am surrounded by whipper-snappers" he told Clem. "I want you by my side", stressing the value he placed on his judgment. "You have not slipped up once". For his party managers, however, this would also have meant an appealing opportunity to absorb the Liberal vote, probably permanently. Clem consulted his colleagues overnight, who were nearly all against it, and declined the offer. Winston, who had reached a very lacrimose stage of life by then, wept when he heard the news, and embracing Clem-called it the "greatest act of political self-abnegation I have ever known". As usual, Clem was putting Party needs first. His decision was critical to its ability to survive as an independent force; in one writer's words "a ringing re-affirmation of its determination to do so".

**Resignation and Last Years.** By 1956, after 11 years at the helm, it was time to hand over to a younger man (Joe Grimond). He announced his resignation at the Party conference, which burst spontaneously into a chorus of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow', as the tears streamed down his face. Tributes poured in from all quarters. He received over 200 letters, including one from the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Party's President Leonard Behrens wrote to say that "You have stood up to forces which would have crushed a lesser man, and you have sacrificed personal advancement for the sake of Liberalism".

Clem continued his work in parliament as an MP following his resignation. [slide 28] His youngest son, Stanley, married my mother, Joanna, a beautiful and charming concert pianist from Swansea, who also dabbled in acting and journalism. "Dieu bach", said a milkman for whom she opened the door one day at Dyffryn, "I had heard you were something special, but I was not expecting all that lot!"

[slides 29 and 30] In 1962, he became seriously ill again, the Daily Telegraph describing him as "an impressive ghost...waxen of face, silver-haired, strikingly handsome and dignified". He died in hospital on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, aged 78, still an MP, just after the Liberals had won a stunning by-election victory at Orpington, in which they overturned a 15,000 Tory majority. The Times wrote that: "Liberalism as a continuing political force in this country owes much to the selfless devotion with which Clement-Davies guided and nourished the small Liberal group at Westminster. His unwavering faith and steady fortitude won him the respect and affection of colleagues of all parties." But let's give him the last word.....[UTube Pathe News clip- 'The Liberal Message, 1951']

Thank you for listening. It has been a privilege and honour to speak at this event today. I hope you have enjoyed it.

Christopher Clement-Davies.

February 2020

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<sup>12</sup> His name is carved in the stone monument outside the Knesset which commemorates its founders and supporters.

<sup>13</sup> My father went to work for the new movement in Brussels for two years.