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The Making of Jim Griffiths M.P. – ‘One of the greatest sons of Wales’

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The making of Jim Griffiths M.P. - 'One of the greatest sons of Wales'

Jim Callaghan's description, above, of the Right Honourable James (Jim)¹ Griffiths (1890-1975) in a Memorial Address² is that of a former coalminer, President of the South Wales Miners' Federation, MP, Minister responsible for the introduction of much of the welfare state in the 1945 Labour Government, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and the first Secretary of State for Wales. James (Jim) Griffiths was the most noteworthy, alongside Aneurin Bevan, of a generation of Labour politicians - former miners from the South Wales coalfields. His life encompassed the formation and rise of the Labour Party, great turbulence in the mining industry and heart breaking poverty in South Wales during the depression. After the Second World War came the triumph of the 1945 Labour government and its packed legislative programme, followed by many years in opposition, the decline of coal-mining and the difficult years facing Labour in the nineteen sixties and seventies. Jim Griffiths, Welsh-speaking and steeped in Welsh culture, ended his parliamentary career with his appointment as the first Secretary of State for Wales, as the process of devolution made a hesitant start under a Labour government.

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the influences which led to Jim Griffiths becoming perhaps the leading member of the cohort of former miners who followed the 'pit to parliament' route, in South Wales and elsewhere. In 1936, 13 of the 17 Welsh Labour MPs were former miners. Not all of his fellow Welsh mining MPs had the same background as Jim Griffiths. Many, like Aneurin Bevan, were monoglot English speakers. Experiences in the West Wales relatively small anthracite collieries, in which Jim Griffiths worked, were different from those in the large steam-coal mines of the Glamorganshire and Monmouthshire valleys. Jim Griffiths's rapid rise to the front bench and later to important positions in the Labour Party indicate outstanding personal qualities. An attempt will be made to identify how those qualities were developed through his life experiences.

As a major figure in the history of the Labour Party, Jim Griffiths's life and work is extensively covered. Kenneth O. Morgan, in particular, has published several books in which he puts forward his views on Griffiths. He devotes a chapter of 'Labour People' (1997)³ to him and gave an interesting lecture in 1988 entitled 'The Red Dragon and the Red Flag'⁴ in which he compared Jim Griffiths and Aneurin Bevan. Other eminent Welsh historians such as John Davies (2007)⁵ Geraint H. Jenkins⁶ and Gwyn W. Williams⁷ all refer to Griffiths. The most detailed biography and analysis of Jim Griffiths is by D. Ben Rees – Jim⁸ published in Welsh in 2014⁹ as 'Arwr Glew y Werin' (Great Hero of the People) and republished in a 350 page 'coffee table' edition in English in 2020. Both Rees and Morgan used Griffiths's papers, available at the National Library of Wales. A fellow mining MP and good friend of Griffiths – Gordon

¹ Griffiths was named Jeremiah at birth. He adopted the name James as a youth and was known as Jim throughout his life, although the more formal James was also often used. In Wales he was known as *Jim ni* (our Jim).

² The Labour Party Wales and Llanelli Constituency Labour Party (undated) *James Griffiths and his times*

³ Morgan, K.O. (1997) *Labour People*

⁴ Morgan, K.O. *The Red Dragon and the Red Flag*

⁵ Davies, J. *A History of Wales*

⁶ Jenkins, G.H. *A Concise History of Wales*

⁷ Williams, G.A. (1985) *When was Wales*

⁸ Rees, D. B. (2020) *Jim*

⁹ Rees, D.B (2014) *Arwr Glew y Werin*

Macdonald (later Lord Macdonald of Gwaenysgor)- devotes a chapter of his parliamentary memoirs –‘Atgofion Seneddol’(1949)¹⁰ to him. An interesting publication is ‘James Griffiths and his Times’ (1975)¹¹, published by the Labour Party Wales and Llanelli Constituency Labour Party. It contains previously unpublished work by Jim Griffiths reflecting his views of Welsh politics from 1906-1973, as well as a thoughtful appreciation of him by Beverley Smith. The campaign started by Theo Davies-Lewis in 2018 for a statue of Jim Griffiths in Llanelli – ‘Cofio Jim’ (Remembering Jim’)¹² has published articles and produced a podcast¹³ justifying the campaign, which includes interviews by those who knew Jim Griffiths.

As well as books which directly concern Jim Griffiths, books and articles which relate to the background of his life and in particular to important influences such as the Rev. R.J. Campbell, Keir Hardie, the Central Labour College and the South Wales Miners’ Federation (‘Fed’) have been consulted.

Primary sources include above all Jim Griffiths’s autobiography *Pages from Memory* (1969)¹⁴ and that of his ever-supportive wife, Winifred Griffiths (1979) *One Woman’s Story*.¹⁵ Background information on the experience of coalmining is in the autobiography of B.L. Coombes (1939, republished 2010) *These poor hands: the autobiography of a Miner in South Wales*. Biographer D. Ben Rees provides many primary sources found among Jim Griffiths’s papers. Hansard provided access to Jim Griffiths’s speeches, questions and interventions in the House of Commons, of which there are 8927. Newspaper archives such as British Newspapers Online give access to newspaper reports – there are many references to Griffiths. Statistical data concerning the coal industry has been consulted as well as material concerning the town of Llanelli, Jim Griffiths’s parliamentary constituency. A BBC television programme¹⁶ recorded in 1962, consists of an interview (in Welsh) with Griffiths in which he discusses the people and events which most influenced him.

There is thus ample material available to learn about the major events in Jim Griffiths’s life and some useful analysis of his importance by eminent historians such as Kenneth O. Morgan, especially in his 1987 book *Labour People*¹⁷. What this dissertation aims to do is not to provide another, simplified, biography but to explain, as his career is examined, **why** Jim Griffiths was so successful. What were the relative contributions of his Welshness, nonconformity, work as a miner, self-education, political beliefs, organising ability, interpersonal skills and strong ambition? The dissertation consists of three chronological chapters:

- 1) Early life in Welsh Wales (1870-1914)
- 2) ‘Educate, Organise, Agitate’: (1914-1936)
- 3) ‘A New Dawn?’ (1936-1970).

¹⁰ Macdonald G. (1949) *Atgofion Seneddol*

¹¹ Labour Party Wales (undated)

¹² www.facebook.com/cofiojim

¹³ Davies-Lewis, T. (2018) <http://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/22-welsh-political> icons

¹⁴ Griffiths, J. (1969) *Pages from Memory*

¹⁵ Griffiths, W. (1979) *One Woman’s Story*

¹⁶ *Dylanwadau* (Influences) 1962 BBC 15 March 1962

¹⁷ Morgan K.O. (1987) *Labour People*

Each chapter will try to analyse what was significant during the period concerned in 'the making of Jim Griffiths'.

The era of Welsh coal-mining and 'pit to parliament' is over but the turbulence and struggle of the first half of the twentieth century in South Wales and the achievements of the 1945 Labour Government, in both of which Jim Griffiths was a major figure, are worth remembering in these very different times.

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Chapter One – Early years in Welsh Wales (1890-1918)

Jim Griffiths was born in the Carmarthenshire village of Betws, near Ammanford. In 1901, when he was eleven years old, 90.3% of the local population were either monoglot Welsh (35.6%) or bilingual Welsh and English (54.7%)¹⁸ Welsh was the home language of the Griffiths family, although education at Betws Board School, attended by the eight children of the family, was in English. Griffiths was completely bilingual, a big advantage only fleetingly referred to in the historiography. It meant that he was fully accepted in strongly Welsh-speaking areas such as Merionethshire and Caernarvonshire, was able to communicate to the Welsh broadcast media and to write articles in Welsh. He undoubtedly had a wider view of Wales beyond the industrial valleys of South Wales than many of his contemporaries, such as Aneurin Bevan and Ness Edwards. There is also some evidence¹⁹ that bilingualism has cognitive benefits such as proficiency in tasks requiring conflict management or the ability to ignore irrelevant material – useful abilities in negotiation. Bilingualism also allows full access to the literature and culture of both languages, which Jim Griffiths enjoyed throughout his life. He refers in his autobiography to the Welsh language magazines available in the home – *Llais Llafur* ('Labour's Voice') and *Tarian y Gweithiwr* ('The Workers' Shield').²⁰ His brother David (known by his Bardic name, Amanwy)– became a renowned Welsh language poet, winning many chairs²¹ at the National Eisteddfod. The family home was 'littered with Eisteddfod chairs' according to Gwynoro Jones, former MP.²² The importance of Jim Griffiths's bilingualism should perhaps be better acknowledged. His wife Winifred was English and their four children, living in London for most of their lives, were brought up not speaking Welsh. In

¹⁸ Languages in Wales and Monmouthshire 1901 Vision of Britain.org.uk

¹⁹ Marian, V. and Shook, A. (2012)

²⁰ Griffiths, J. (1969) p.5

²¹ The prize for the best poetry in the *Eisteddfod*, a Welsh-language cultural festival, is a large, ornately-decorated wooden chair.

²² Llanelli Online News Podcast [Cofio Jim Griffiths MP \(spreaker.com\)](https://www.spreaker.com/2017/07/20/cofio-jim-griffiths-mp/)

a 1962 TV interview²³ Griffiths claimed, however, that his greatest wish was the saving of the Welsh language. He was proud that the first State all-Welsh school – Ysgol Dewi Sant - was opened in Llanelli, his then constituency in 1947.

Welsh was the language used in the Welsh Congregational or Independent (Annibynwyr) nonconformist chapel he attended (three times on Sunday and several times during the week) for a variety of activities – Gellimanwydd chapel, Ammanford, also known as the Christian Temple. It was to be his burial place. Nonconformity was well established in Wales by the middle of the nineteenth century. Between 1811 to 1914 five thousand nonconformist chapels were built in Wales.²⁴

Which of the characteristics of Welsh nonconformist chapels influenced Jim Griffiths – and many other future Welsh Labour politicians? Firstly, their democratic nature, in sharp contrast to the ways of the established Anglican Church. Local people used their savings to build the chapels. The members of the chapel selected and paid the minister and elected the deacons. Thus the notion of elections and participation in ‘ecclesiastical republics’²⁵ came early to young members like Jim Griffiths.

Having selected a minister, what did the members expect of him (always him at that time)? Above all, inspirational oratory. The use of emotion and fervour exemplified by Daniel Rowland and others in the eighteenth century continued as a characteristic of Welsh nonconformist preaching well into the twentieth century and was certainly a feature of Jim Griffiths’s young years. When asked in a television interview²⁶ whether he might have enjoyed being a minister of religion, as planned by his father, Griffiths agreed, explaining that he would have enjoyed speaking from the pulpit, as he loved speaking before large audiences, on stage at a conference or in a packed meeting. He was instantly able to name three ministers who impressed him in his youth. His own public speaking style was reminiscent of the best Welsh preaching, ending with the expected ‘hwyl’ (‘the end to which all true oratory leads’ according to Dr Elvet Lewis, famous preacher and poet).²⁷ According to Rees (2020):

‘From a quiet and contained, but expectant beginning, the preacher ...ascended a scale of intensity that frequently culminated in a rapt congregation’

Jim Griffiths sometimes banged the table when speaking²⁸, ensuring a rapt audience, if not congregation. The ability to speak with the passion and rousing emotions associated with Welsh orators was not possessed by Jim Griffiths alone of course, but he, like others, owed a great deal to what had been unconsciously absorbed during chapel services.

In addition to providing examples of effective public speaking, Welsh nonconformist chapels were extremely efficient providers of education, including musical training (tonic sol-fa which enabled the characteristic Welsh singing in parts) and community services, as well as reinforcers of the Welsh language. Chapels were influential in non Welsh-speaking areas too.

²³ *Dylanwadau* (1962) BBC TV

²⁴ Davies, H. (1988)

²⁵ Rees, R. (2020)

²⁶ *Dylanwadau: Y Gwir Anrhydeddus James Griffiths* A.S. 1962

²⁷ Rees, R. (2020) p.61

²⁸ Llanelli Online News Podcast (2018)

Aneurin Bevan thought Sunday Schools helped mould the character of the miners by cultivating the gift of expression.²⁹

Welsh chapels encouraged temperance, through organisations like the Band of Hope and Jim Griffiths was a lifelong teetotaler – a useful asset in politics. Although many Welsh trade unionists and activists (e.g. A.J. Cook and Arthur Horner) abandoned their Christian faith, this was probably unusual.³⁰ A shift of emphasis was more common, towards a ‘social gospel’. This was the case for Jim Griffiths, who spoke of a regrettable ‘oerni’ (cooling)³¹ between chapels and those young people switching from Liberalism, the partner of nonconformity for decades, towards Socialist ideas.

1908 was one of the most eventful and influential years in the life of Jim Griffiths. His eldest brother Gwilym was killed in a pit explosion – as Griffiths put it, he ‘paid the price of coal’.³² Griffiths had started work five years earlier in a local anthracite mine, aged thirteen, and was to spend seventeen years working underground. The authenticity which this gave him remained throughout his long career. He recalled³³ feeling like a grown-up hero on his first day, although he rejected any accusation of ‘sentimentalising’ coal-mining, acknowledging its brutally-hard, dangerous and uncertain nature, while admiring the solidarity and loyalty of the miners. Late in life he recalled toasting, with an American miners’ leader, ‘the day the last miner comes out of the last pit’.³⁴

1908 was the year of his entry into political activism. Two symbolic events can be singled out: the visit of Keir Hardie, founder of the ILP (Independent Labour Party), to nearby Gwauncaegurwen and the Rev. R.J. Campbell’s visit to Panteg, Ystalyfera. These two men and their ideas had a huge influence on the 18 year old Griffiths, brought up in a book-filled household and accustomed to hearing political discussion at his blacksmith father’s forge and among his fellow mineworkers. 1908 was the year in which the MFGB (Miners’ Federation of Great Britain) voted to affiliate as a Trade Union to the Labour Party. Liberalism, linked with nonconformity, held sway, however, until 1918 with its policies of temperance, the disestablishment of the Anglican church, social welfare and land reform. Although there was an acknowledgement in the Liberal Party that the working class should be represented in parliament – hence the Lib-Lab mining MPs such as William Abraham (‘Mabon’), there was little desire among the Liberals to question the root causes of social injustice or industrial conflict. Keir Hardie, himself a former miner, helped to form the ILP in 1893, organised the setting up of the LRC (Labour Representation Committee) - the future Labour Party - in 1900 and became Labour MP for Merthyr Boroughs in the same year. Following his visit to Gwauncaegurwen an ILP branch was established in Ammanford and Jim Griffiths quickly became its secretary- one of many secretaryships he was to hold throughout his life, including that of his youth rugby club, aged 15. The role of secretary is very influential in an organisation, as well as requiring organisational skills. It might be that Jim Griffiths was ambitious enough to find the posts useful for a possible future career – or more probably was

²⁹ Francis, H. & Smith, D. (1980) p.10

³⁰ Lewis (2000) p. 92

³¹ *Dylanwadau* (1962)

³² Griffiths, J. (1969) p.11

³³ *Dylanwadau* (1962)

³⁴ *The Times*, 2 January 1974

young and enthusiastic. The message of Keir Hardie³⁵ was complemented by that of the Rev. R.J. Campbell, pleading for a new social order founded on Christian ethics and rejecting the Liberal Party. This 'New Theology' was anathema to some traditional nonconformists, many of whom were still influenced by the 1904-5 Welsh Revival, led by Evan Roberts, with its emphasis on personal salvation. Jim Griffiths had been reading Campbell's sermons, published in religious magazines, for some time.

As soon as he started work, Griffiths began a rigorous programme of self-education. He followed classes in 'The Science and Art of Mining', WEA classes on political economics using 'Economics for the General Reader,' which required an essay a month and correspondence courses organised by Ruskin College, Oxford. He was aware of the work of Noah Ablett and the 1911 syndicalist pamphlet 'The Miners' Next Step' which was finding fertile soil in the Glamorganshire and Monmouthshire mining valleys, where the Marxist or syndicalist critiques of capitalism were accepted by many activists. Griffiths was not attracted by these movements which held less sway in the anthracite coalfield. Political work continued, however. A wealthy anarchist, George Davison, bought and refurbished a former rectory in Ammanford christened 'The White House' for the use of the political discussion groups in which Griffiths was heavily involved, as secretary of a 'Workers' Forum', and to which he invited Noah Ablett, George Lansbury and A.J. Cook as speakers. Griffiths, like Keir Hardie and Ramsay Macdonald, was a committed pacifist. His thirst for education and for disseminating socialist ideas showed itself in his first letters to Winifred, his English future wife, enclosed with a parcel of books including Zola's 'Germinal', addressed to 'Dear Comrade' and signed 'Yours fraternally'.³⁶

By 1918 Jim Griffiths was becoming well established locally as a diligent, knowledgeable and committed Labour party member, active in his Trade Union. His early years in Welsh Wales had prepared him well for the turbulent two decades to come.

³⁵ The Labour movement is an attempt to enable the working class to realise itself, its thoughts and aspirations. At present the 'people' is a formless and shapeless and wireless mass at best...We will change all this by developing the self-respect and manhood of the workers and placing Labour so strongly on its feet that it will be able to stand alone without the aid of crutches, whether those be called Liberal or Conservative.

³⁶ Griffiths, J. (1969)

Chapter Two - 'Educate, Organise, Agitate' (1918-1936)

The nineteen-twenties and thirties were perhaps the most gruelling of Jim Griffiths's life, in which he became a leading trade unionist and future eminent politician. Apart from the knowledge he gained through his work as a miners' agent and as a Labour Party organiser, he enjoyed 'two years away from the hooter, free from hard toil, surrounded by books, engrossed in argument'³⁷ at the Marxist-orientated Central Labour College (CLC), in London, through a scholarship granted by the South Wales Miners' Federation (the 'Fed').

The CLC was the inspiration of Noah Ablett and others, dissatisfied with the conventional teaching of Ruskin College, Oxford. The aim was to produce:

A body of men, scientifically trained to adapt themselves to the needs of the workers, with a knowledge of the economics of labour, coupled with the ability of speech and the pen, who would naturally be expected to wield a great influence in their localities³⁸

Jim Griffiths was a student from 1919-1921, alongside Ness Edwards, Aneurin Bevan and three other future Labour MPs, in this 'Mecca of the Left'.³⁹ Of students at CLC, sixteen were to become members of the 1945-51 Labour governments and four of them, including Griffiths, were in the cabinet.

He was a markedly diligent student (unlike Aneurin Bevan)⁴⁰ and also took advantage of the cultural events available in London. His wife worked in a nearby dry cleaners during his time at the college. As fellow socialists they discussed his studies and found 'claims of the Marxians extravagant and their explanation of life and man's activities incredibly narrow'.⁴¹ Jim Griffiths was never persuaded by syndicalism or Marxism, despite having studied the writings of both currents closely and being very aware of the influence of Ablett and others during the earlier period of the Plebs League and 'The Miners' Next Step' (1911). His Christian Socialism overrode these movements. He did, however, find the economic analysis of capitalism had considerable validity. He and Winifred briefly joined a Communist Party branch in Ammanford when the Workers' Forum ceased but found the 'HQ ridiculous directives'⁴² unacceptable - 'My Welsh temperament recoiled against such an arid doctrine'.⁴³ The two years he spent at the college equipped him, however, with detailed knowledge of economics, industrial history, evolution, trade union law and literature and he shared this knowledge, as did other alumni of the college, in the many evening classes he taught on his return to Wales. 'Gwybodaeth sydd Nerth' (Knowledge is power) was a guiding principle for Griffiths and there is little doubt that his possession of facts and his ability to articulate them convincingly made him a very

³⁷ Griffiths, J (1969)

³⁸ Craik, W. (1964) p.65

³⁹ Smith, J.B (Undated) p.73

⁴⁰ Craik, W. (1964) pp 123-4

⁴¹ Griffiths, W. (2006) p. 89

⁴² Griffiths, W. (2006) p. 100

⁴³ Griffiths, J. (1969) p. 197

powerful advocate or adversary, leading to his repeated election to posts of responsibility throughout his life.

Of these elected posts, one of the most important in the coalfield areas was that of miners' agent. Griffiths was elected as miners' agent for the Anthracite Miners' Association in 1925, responsible for representing miners in 29 collieries. His role involved the settlement of wage rates (far more complicated in mining than in any other industry), unfair dismissals, the recognition of 'abnormal conditions' and 'compo' (compensation for illness or injury). The miners' agent had to be experienced, numerate, competent, reliable and trustworthy – Griffiths was all of those things. His journey through the ranks of the 'Fed' to the presidency itself was only possible because of his reputation as a strong, knowledgeable and sensible man, who could at the same time stir large crowds with his oratory, in both English and Welsh.

Before his election as miners' agent, Jim Griffiths had been a full-time Labour Party Agent for two years in Llanelli, the town which was eventually to become his parliamentary constituency. Here his skill as an organiser, built up in the many secretarial roles he had held, was used to full effect. He had been delighted with Arthur Henderson's post-war reforms to the Labour Party – introducing individual membership and a professional approach to elections and campaigning.⁴⁴ He recruited teams of canvassers, set up an office and a party newsletter, Llanelly Labour News, organised sixty-six public meetings and set about ensuring that the Labour candidate – a rather ineffectual but principled GP – would be at last elected as the first Labour MP for Llanelli, which he was, in 1922 and in every election until his death in 1936.

Griffiths was still in post in Llanelli when the anthracite strike in Ammanford erupted. 30,000 miners struck following a dispute with the new Combines over the long-established 'seniority rule' and the dispute ended in considerable violence. According to Francis⁴⁵ the strike had 'immeasurable significance in the development of a sophisticated trade union consciousness among the whole of the South Wales miners', yet although he did address strike meetings Griffiths makes scarce mention of it in his autobiography. With his reconciliatory temperament he would have found the violence counter-productive. That is not to say, however, that his analysis of the factors behind the strike was not clearly anti-capitalist.

There can be no peace without justice; and there can be no justice under capitalism. So long as labour is exploited, so long must there be war. The class war is not made by hotheads, call them Communists or Bolsheviks. The Class War is a consequence of a system that is based on robberyIt will only end when those who produce own as well. The Class War is at its bitterest when capitalism reaches the Combine stage. It has reached that stage in the anthracite coalfield.⁴⁶

Griffiths was ⁴⁷a miners' agent when the anthracite strike was settled, back in his role as a skilled negotiator. The following year saw the 1926 General Strike, with Griffiths now on the executive of the 'Fed', therefore heavily involved in the strike and the subsequent lock-out. He was initially proud that the miners stayed out when the TUC ended the strike after nine

⁴⁴ Morgan, K.O. (1987) pp 78-87

⁴⁵ Francis, H. (1973)

⁴⁶ Smith, J.B (undated) p 82

⁴⁷ Morris, M. (1976) pp. 276-7

days – ‘Welsh people are emotional, religious temperamentally, and there was a feeling; unless we stand to the end, we’re finished, done for.’ However, he later acknowledged that the price of the 1926 price was ‘awful’, leaving men in poverty for the rest of their lives - ‘The great dream and the swift disaster.’⁴⁸ Organising soup kitchens and even distributing permits to steal coal⁴⁹ convinced him of the hardship being suffered. Despite his support at the time he revised his views and eventually thought the men should have ended the strike, alongside the other unions. While praising A.J. Cook, the miners’ leader, as a wonderful ‘evangelist’ he is scathing about his lack of negotiating skills.⁵⁰ The General Strike and its repercussions were a major influence on Jim Griffiths and although he led other fights, such as the Nine Mile Point ‘stay-down’ struggle to stop the ‘Spencer’ non-political company unions from supplanting the ‘Fed’, he realised that his strength lay in pragmatism and negotiation. His election as Vice-President of the ‘Fed’ in 1932 and, unopposed, as President in 1934 indicate that these qualities were appreciated in a union thrown into despair after years of unemployment and harsh treatment. Membership had plummeted from 124,000 in 1924 to 73,000 in 1927.⁵¹ Davies (2007)⁵² claims that 1926 confirmed doubts about syndicalism and strengthened belief in the parliamentary path.

Jim Griffiths was certainly no friend of coal owners. In his short book ‘Glo’ (Coal)⁵³ he gives a masterly exposition of the unique dangers and uncertainty of life as a coal miner, including the consequences of raw capitalism, when lowering costs to maintain profits is always at the expense of the miners. Death, injury and illness were everyday occurrences in coal mines. The depression in South Wales and the infamous Means Test horrified him. He called a conference on the latter where ‘the singing was even more expressive of our feelings than the speeches’⁵⁴ and took part in a deputation to the Minister of Labour.⁵⁵ The ‘Fed’ which ‘went into the General Strike an army and came out of it a rabble’⁵⁶ was now presided over by a man who restored it to a credible and effective trade union through ‘infinite patience, persistence, care, resolution and where necessary ruthlessness’.⁵⁷

There was therefore considerable disappointment⁵⁸ in trade union circles when Griffiths decided to stand for parliament following the death of the MP for Llanelli in 1936. The route from coal miner to miners’ agent to parliament was well-trodden and in the case of some, but not all, was certainly a loss of talent from the trade union movement at a time when such talent was badly needed. Criticism of Jim Griffiths for his ‘desertion’ continued in his early days as an MP when the coal industry was in deep trouble, but lessened as he showed himself to be effective on behalf of miners in the House.⁵⁹

⁴⁸ From Davies, I (1938) *Gwalia Deserta*

⁴⁹ Morris, M. (1976) p.60

⁵⁰ Morris, M. (1976) p.283

⁵¹ Davies, J. (2007) p.541

⁵² Davies, J. (2007)

⁵³ Griffiths, J. (1945)

⁵⁴ Griffiths, J. (1969) p 45

⁵⁵ *The Times* 21 July 1936

⁵⁶ Williams, G. A. (1985) p 268

⁵⁷ Williams, G.A. (1985) p 269

⁵⁸ Macdonald G. (1949)

⁵⁹ Macdonald, G. (1949)

The years of struggle and discord in South Wales had brought out those characteristics of Jim Griffiths which allowed him to become an eminent trade unionist. He was one of many South Wales talented former miners such as his fellow students at CLC – Aneurin Bevan and Ness Edwards- as well as renowned men like Vernon Hartshorn, S.O. Davies, Arthur Jenkins, Will Paynter and Arthur Horner. He held his own in such company, despite his much more moderate political views, because of his grasp of detail, skill as a negotiator, dislike of capitalism, devotion to miners – and strong ambition. As an MP he was to use those qualities to good effect.

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Chapter Three – ‘A New Dawn?’ (1936-1970)

The constituency of Llanelli, a tinplate town known in its heyday as ‘Tinopolis’, also contained mining areas, both Welsh and English speaking households, influential nonconformist chapels and a tradition of militancy. It was Jim Griffiths’s home area, where he had been a successful Labour Party Agent from 1922-1924. He represented it for 34 years, with increasingly huge majorities of over 30,000.

On his arrival in the House of Commons he immediately joined the mining and trade union groups (before long becoming secretary). According to his close friend Gordon Macdonald, Welsh-speaking former miner and a Lancashire MP, Griffiths mastered the rather odd customs and traditions of the House very speedily, coming second in the number of questions put to ministers in his second year as an MP.⁶⁰ With no secretarial assistance available to MPs at that time he replied to all his correspondence by hand and by return of post.⁶¹ He spoke with expert knowledge on the problems of the ‘Special areas’, the mining industry, silicosis, and, in an excoriating speech on the 22 March 1939⁶², the scourge of tuberculosis in Wales. In this wide-ranging speech, later published by the Labour Party as a pamphlet, based on authoritative statistics, he described ‘The Price Wales Pays for Poverty’ – maternal mortality, malnutrition, overcrowding, condemned housing, unemployment, silicosis, and the terrible affliction of tuberculosis. He pointed out the vast wealth taken from Wales by coal owners, royalty owners and landlords and demanded adequate resources to deal with the country’s problems. When first elected he had said that the Labour Party should be ‘a faithful mirror of

⁶⁰ Macdonald, G. (1949) p. 55

⁶¹ Rees, D.B (2020)

⁶² James Griffiths MP *Hansard* (1939)

the life and struggles of the Welsh people.⁶³ The masterly speech shows why Jim Griffiths came so quickly to prominence in parliament. Douglas Jay in his autobiography⁶⁴ explains it thus:

Jim Griffiths was almost unique in possessing all the Celtic oratorical gifts at their best and in full measure, and a high degree of practical common sense at the same time. He also represented admirably the old nonconformist conscience of the Labour movement which was still strong in 1944.

The visits which Jim Griffiths undertook shortly before the Second World War, to Prague, Danzig and Spain convinced him to lay aside the pacifism which had seen him oppose the First World War, in order to defeat Hitler, the 'insane fanatic' who had to be crushed.⁶⁵ During the war he sat on the front bench in opposition to the coalition government and in February 1943 led an unsuccessful attack on the government's failure to welcome and fully accept the findings of the Beveridge report. Griffiths had long been campaigning for universal measures to replace Lloyd George's limited help. When the critical amendment was defeated (325 votes to 119) Griffiths told Beveridge 'This debate, and the division, makes the return of a Labour Government to power at the next election a certainty.'⁶⁶ He was right, and from 1945 to 1951 he was a member of perhaps the most successful Labour Government of all time. His busy first nine years in parliament (1936-1945) when he was recognised as a safe pair of hands, with cogent ideas, attention to detail and good communicative skills, had ensured that his friend Clement Attlee would appoint him to an important post. He was one of those chosen to address the nation in an election broadcast – 'Labour does not offer ease and comfort. What we shall offer is the opportunity for every man and woman to use their capacities to the full.'⁶⁷ The government post he chose, which would further that objective, was that of Minister of National Insurance. His compatriot and fellow former miner, Aneurin Bevan, became Minister of Health and between them they founded the modern Welfare State and National Health Service, building on the work of another Welshman, David Lloyd George, earlier in the century. Davies (2007) speculates that concern for social justice is 'a particular trait of the Welsh.'⁶⁸ To set up a new Ministry and get controversial legislation through parliament used all the skills which Jim Griffiths had developed during his career. Every detail of the new provisions for Family Allowances (1945) National Insurance (1946) and National Assistance and Industrial Injuries (1948) had to be clearly thought through as legislation, with numerous amendments scrutinised and accepted or rejected. Both Griffiths and Bevan proved themselves to be admirable technicians and skilful politicians, as well as convincing orators.

Alongside his work as a government Minister, Jim Griffiths became a leading member of the Labour Party, elected to the NEC (National Executive Committee) for the first time in 1938 and remaining a member for twenty years. Election to the constituency section of the NEC requires candidates to be recognised and valued by party members throughout the country. How did Jim Griffiths achieve this? Partly through his fame in trade union circles but also

⁶³ Tanner, D., Williams, C. and Hughes, D. (2000)

⁶⁴ Rees, D. B. (2020) p. 133

⁶⁵ Griffiths, J. (1969) p. 67

⁶⁶ Griffiths, J. (1969) p. 72

⁶⁷ Griffiths, J. (1969) p. 77

⁶⁸ Davies, J. (2007) p. 601

because of the punishing schedule he set himself of accepting every invitation he could as a speaker. The following few examples indicate the extent to which he gave his time: Derry (Evidence to Beveridge),⁶⁹ Burnley,⁷⁰ Biggleswade,⁷¹ Portsmouth (The price of coal),⁷² Derry (South Africa's racial policy is morally wrong),⁷³ Luton⁷⁴ and Llandudno (Labour Party rally). Coverage in local or national newspapers and regular radio broadcasts helped to ensure that he was well known - already the case in Wales, of course, including in the Welsh-speaking quarrying towns of North Wales. The accusation of over-riding ambition, often made against him⁷⁵ may be borne out by this frantic work programme, but he may also have been driven by the need to educate the people of Britain in the difficult post-war years.

In 1949, in his address to Conference as Labour Party Chairman he made clear his longstanding mistrust of Communism, proclaiming Democratic Socialism as being the only bulwark against it. He promised efficiency and democracy in the newly nationalised industries and a competent and humane government administration. Although Labour narrowly won the 1950 election, it was defeated the following year and Griffiths spent 13 years in opposition, forfeiting the Cabinet post as Secretary for the Colonies which he apparently thought of as his most fulfilling.⁷⁶ The independence movement in Africa and elsewhere was well underway when he was in post and he relished the spirit he found among the new leaders during his wide travels. Some in Wales, however, questioned his enthusiasm for independence in former colonies, compared to his failure to embrace independence for his homeland.⁷⁷

Griffiths represented his constituency assiduously, alongside his ministerial duties. Aware of the coming decline of coal mining, he ensured that Llanelli and area were the recipients of new work in the Trostre and Velindre tinplating industry – at the expense of other sites and using his influence, no doubt to the annoyance of other MPs.

At the end of his career Jim Griffiths became the first Secretary of State for Wales. The road to the creation of this office was not easy - powerful adversaries like Aneurin Bevan, Ness Edwards and Morgan Phillips (fellow CLC alumnus and General Secretary of the Labour Party) were big obstacles. Neither Bevan nor Edwards spoke Welsh but their objection to home rule for Wales was political, not cultural. Both believed that solutions to the problems facing Wales should be tackled in a wider economic context. Ness Edwards did not want to see Wales treated as a separate nation, comparing its status to that of Yorkshire or Lancashire.⁷⁸ Discussions about devolution had taken place in Wales throughout the twentieth century and beforehand, from the short-lived nineteenth century '*Cymru Fydd*' movement led by Lloyd George, to the '*Plaid Cymru*' (Welsh Nationalist Party) push for full independence. Jim Griffiths did not support independence but was strongly in favour of the devolution of

⁶⁹ Londonderry Sentinel (1942)

⁷⁰ Burnley Express (1949)

⁷¹ Biggleswade Chronicle (1951)

⁷² Portsmouth Evening News (1952)

⁷³ Derry Journal (1952)

⁷⁴ Luton News and Bedfordshire Chronicle(1953)

⁷⁵ Macdonald, G. (1949) p.56

⁷⁶ *Dylanwadau* BBC TV (1962)

⁷⁷ *Dylanwadau* BBC TV (1962)

⁷⁸ David, W. (2008) p.85

government competences to a Welsh body. He chaired one of the advisory bodies which were established and used his credibility with Hugh Gaitskell, the party leader, to make progress. In the last stages of negotiation he overcame the emotional opposition of Aneurin Bevan using 'all his power as a negotiator'.⁷⁹ Bevan conceded defeat and the role of Secretary of State for Wales became party policy, implemented in 1964 by the appointment of Jim Griffiths to the post.

Jim Griffiths had valued loyalty⁸⁰ throughout his career – as a miner, trade unionist and Labour Party member. He was no ally of Aneurin Bevan, politically – he defeated him in the election for Deputy Leader of the party, but played an important role more than once in preventing Bevan's expulsion, placing party unity above factionalism. Griffiths ended his long parliamentary career in 1970, having stayed on as an MP to thwart a plausible *Plaid Cymru* threat to his Llanelli seat, displaying his political nous to the end.

⁷⁹ David, W. p.86

⁸⁰ *Dylanwadau* (1962) BBC TV

Conclusion

Jim Griffiths lived history. His long life encompassed the founding and growth of the Labour Party, the high point, and the decline of the Welsh coal-mining industry (By 1971 more were working on the land than in mining),⁸¹ the turmoil of desperate industrial action, the dreadful years of poverty during the Depression, the achievements of the 1945 Labour government, the growth of independence in former colonies and the slow move towards Welsh devolution. He was an active participant in all these historical events. Alongside Aneurin Bevan, Ness Edwards and many others he symbolised the ‘pit to parliament’ advent of the talented former miners who had to leave school early to start work and arrived in the House of Commons with their miners’ blue scars. Jim Griffiths had a very different personality from Aneurin Bevan – he did not have the acerbic tongue, instinctive rebelliousness and desire to be seen as different which characterised Bevan. His politics were those of mainstream Social Democracy, with a deep suspicion of the outcomes of Communism. He supported Clement Attlee and Hugh Gaitskell on most issues. Ness Edwards claimed that Griffiths was ‘more of a Welshman than a Socialist’, although he voted for Griffiths, not Bevan in the Deputy Leadership election.

This dissertation has tried to follow Jim Griffiths throughout his career, noting that he unerringly showed a winning combination of competence, diligence, and excellent communication skills, whether in negotiation with coal owners, fellow trade unionists and politicians or in crowd-facing eloquence. That he was most certainly a Welshman in every sense is undeniable although his frequent and heartfelt condemnation of capitalism gives the lie to Ness Edwards’s accusation. More accurate, perhaps, is Dafydd’s (2006) description of him as ‘*Cymro, Cymrawd a Gwladweinydd*’ (Welshman, Comrade and Statesman).⁸²

Through studying Jim Griffiths it is possible to glimpse the large Welsh chapel, with the elected deacons in the ‘*sêl fawr*’⁸³ as he listened to fiery sermons, Bible readings in Sunday School, the heated political discussions of miners during their breaks, the hard and dangerous work underground, books for study and thrilling public meetings with Rev R.J. Campbell and Keir Hardie. Later on, the painstaking work of many secretaryships, the stimulating two years at CLC ‘away from the hooter’, responsibility for organising and winning an election by a new political party and the demanding work of representing miners and then helping them through the post 1926 years of penury. A dizzying rise through the ranks of the ‘Fed’ to become President, then the decision to leave and become an MP. Thirty-four years of speaking all over the country, winning the confidence of fellow politicians, taking on a huge legislative task, then travelling all over the world with a new task. Thirteen years out of power, disputes with fellow Welsh MPs about devolution, then victory and a welcome retirement at the age of 74.

This dissertation aimed at identifying what made Jim Griffiths so successful and suggested as possible factors his Welshness, nonconformity, work as a miner, self-education, political beliefs, organising ability, interpersonal skills and strong ambition.

⁸¹ Davies, J. (2007) p.608

⁸² Dafydd, T. (2006)

⁸³ Main pew, beneath the pulpit

As remarked earlier he was very conscious of his nationality, extending his love of Wales to the whole country, aided by his ability to speak Welsh. His upbringing in a nonconformist chapel would have instilled in him a belief in democracy, in temperance and in the virtue of self-improvement, as well as making Christian socialism an alternative to the Communism which became relatively widespread in the Welsh coalfield. His seventeen years working underground and the death of his brother in a pit explosion meant that he never forgot the hardship endured by coalminers, writing an excellent short book⁸⁴ to educate the general public on the facts. Although he was exposed to the Marxist teaching of the CLC its inflexibility and rigour never appealed to him. He was not on the left wing of the Labour Party but neither was he on the right. Ethical socialism was his creed. He was an avid reader and a very diligent student.

Jim Griffiths was the last Welsh former miner MP. All who have written about him have acknowledged his political importance and many pay tribute to his integrity. For Morgan (1987) he was 'the very embodiment of the way in which Labour flourished in Wales by appropriating most of the old radical heritage'.⁸⁵ His obituary in *The Times* (1974)⁸⁶ emphasises both his 'warm and generous personality' with 'unique authority as an influence for peace and reconciliation' who 'fought hard but without rancour, transcending all the warring feuds'. It is important also to emphasise the energy and drive which Griffiths showed throughout his life. Although he had the gift of oratory and was able to explain ideas simply and convincingly, it was also his hard work in preparation, his mastery of statistics and sometimes his cunning which enabled him to be so successful. He claimed that 'all through the years I have doubted if I had the toughness- perhaps the ruthlessness which is required to reach the top and stay there.'⁸⁷ He was wrong and his career is indeed that of 'one of the greatest sons of Wales'.

⁸⁴ Griffith, J. (1945)

⁸⁵ Morgan (1987) p. 197

⁸⁶ *The Times* (1974)

⁸⁷ Griffiths, J. (1969) p.146

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