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The story of the founding of
Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru
(The National Party of Wales)
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WHEN SIX MEN MET IN PWLLHELI

Hitler was released from jail, bound over to keep the peace. Stalin sacked Trotsky, Mussolini grabbed dictatorial powers, Britain's first birth control clinic opened in Abertillery, the miners rebelled against more work for less pay, and the century's worst depression took hold. Nineteen twenty five was not a bad year for news.

But the gossip in Pwllheli as August approached was more concerned with plans to welcome the National Eisteddfod to town. Would there be enough accommodation or would the visitors, as one local poet predicted, be sleeping three in a bed? Should the council allow an application by a circus company to rent a site in town during Eisteddfod week? And what would the magistrates make of a bid by the owner of the West End Hotel to extend his licensing hours for the benefit of bards and hangers on?

The council decided it was inappropriate to host a circus and the eisteddfod at the same time, although one member wondered which event would feature the most clowns. And Mr Creighton of the West End Hotel had his application rejected by the magistrates, despite a suggestion that poets, "a wet lot", would have welcomed the extra drinking hours.

While this was going on a frail grocery salesman was arranging a political meeting in the Maesgwyn Temperance Hotel in the centre of town. There, unnoticed, on the Tuesday of Eisteddfod week, Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru, the National Party of Wales, was formed.

The following day's papers were dominated by a bloody clash between anthracite workers and policemen in Ammanford. Even locally the Maesgwyn meeting was never mentioned. And in those pre-spinning days that was how the founders wanted it. As J.E. Jones, who was to become general secretary of the new party, later wrote:

"There was no flag-waving or pompous oratory in that meeting, there is no record of the members doing

anything other than the job they had set out to do, simply, prosaically and decisively. And that was the most important day in the history of Wales since the time of Owain Glyndŵr."

THE FREEDOM OF SMALL NATIONS

Small though the meeting was, the impetus behind it was part of a world-wide turmoil. It was only seven years since the end of the Great War which had claimed 10 million lives, 40,000 of them Welsh. The recruitment campaigners had sold it as a war for the freedom of small nations, and as Europe's boundaries were being re-drawn in the Versailles peace conference some of the Welsh soldiers who had survived the trenches were beginning to think about their own small nation.

Four of the six who came to the Maesgwyn Temperance had direct experience of the war although only one, the Reverend Lewis Valentine, said categorically that it was this which formed his political views:

"I believed the politicians' rigmarole about the war for small nations and thought that Wales would somehow be sure to benefit. Within less than a month I could see that such ideas were totally worthless and began to hate war intensely. When I came home I was an ardent nationalist."

Another influence - the most important according to J.E.Jones - was Ireland, most of the country having become self-governing in 1922. Although most Welsh people would probably have supported Britain's heavy handed attempt to crush the rebellion across the water there were others who admired the resolution of the Irish and despised the atrocities of the Black and Tans.

Lewis Valentine was one of several Welsh soldiers sent to Ireland who realised that their sympathies were with the Irish. After resuming his studies in Bangor on leaving the army he led a student protest against the hanging of young Irish rebel Kevin Barry in 1920, incurring the wrath of college authorities. There had been similar agitation by Aberystwyth students a few years previously, which led to the banning of their college magazine.

If Ireland, Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania could establish national parliaments why couldn't Wales, with its language and traditions stretching back two thousand years? Surrounded by British imperialism, that was the question being asked by a small but increasing number of young Welsh men and women.

By this time it was becoming almost impossible to accommodate such thoughts within existing political parties. The Liberals' interest in specifically Welsh policies was but a shadow of what it had been in the days of Tom Ellis and the young Lloyd George. When E.T. John, Liberal MP for East Denbigh, tabled a home rule motion before the House of Commons in 1914, only 11 Members of his own party gave their support. And after the dissolution of the Church in Wales in 1919 many Liberals thought that the devolution process had gone far enough.

In one sense the re-establishing of the Irish parliament in 1922 hindered constitutional change in Wales and Scotland. "Home rule all round" had been seen as a way of placating the rebellious Irish. With that problem temporarily out of the way there was less incentive to pay attention to the other Celtic countries. Between 1918 and 1922 the Liberals had organised three rather feeble conferences on Welsh home rule. Only 50 people had attended the last of these in Shrewsbury.

The Liberals' power as well as their commitment was on the wane, as the emerging Labour party displaced it as the dominant force in Wales. In the 1906 general election the Liberals had won every Welsh seat except Keir Hardie's at Merthyr. In 1922 Labour won 18 seats to the Liberals' 11, a pattern confirmed at further elections in 1923 and 1924.

A form of Welsh home rule had been part of Labour policy, with some leaders such as their first MP Keir Hardie and general secretary Arthur Henderson strongly in favour. But in the industrial turmoil of 1925, with a quarter of South Wales' miners unemployed, the bulk of the Labour party could see no place for a Welsh dimension in the workers' struggle.

It was in this climate that a number of Welsh people decided that the only way towards a national future was through a party totally independent of the existing British ones. It was six of these men who came to the Maesgwyn in Pwllheli: six men of very diverse backgrounds.

'IT WILL COME, YOU WAIT AND SEE, IT WILL COME'

THE SALESMAN

Hugh Robert Jones was a quarryman's son from Ebenezer, Caernarfonshire. His first political success was to lead a campaign to change his village's name to Deiniolen. He was concerned that biblical names were more prevalent than Welsh ones in his area.

At the age of 13 he went to work in a quarry himself, but soon had to find lighter employment when he contracted tuberculosis. After spells of office work in Liverpool and Manchester he came back to his roots to work as a grocery salesman. But his lifelong mission was to sell the idea of Welsh self government.

H.R. was the main catalyst behind the meeting in Pwllheli. He had already convened similar but more local gatherings in Caernarfon. By all accounts he was neither a fluent orator or a particularly effective organiser. What he had was legendary enthusiasm, determination and courage. Journalist Gwilym R. Jones recalls him addressing a meeting in the Rhondda when almost crippled by TB. He coughed blood several times during the speech but continued resolutely to the end.

Gwilym R. Jones describes another meeting where alleged supporters tended to mock the organiser and his ideas for Welsh self government and official status for the language:

"H.R.'s response to this attitude was to smile sweetly at them and say 'It will come, you wait and see, it will come'."

He died aged 36, five years after the founding of the party.

THE LECTURER

Saunders Lewis, "the father of modern Welsh nationalism", was born in Wallasey in 1893 and educated privately at the nearby Liscard School for Boys. The son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers, his early experience of Welsh life outside the home was confined to school holidays in Anglesey.

A playwright, poet, historian and critic, he became one of Wales' greatest literary figures and was nominated for a Nobel prize. But he was not by instinct a politician and once claimed that every movement he had ever led had been a failure. This was rather harsh: almost up to his death at the age of 91 he made sporadic observations that caused political ripples.

The Great War interrupted his studies at Liverpool University. He volunteered to join the South Wales Borderers and served as an officer in France, Italy and Greece until the end of hostilities.

Unlike Lewis Valentine and others there is no evidence that the war experience contributed to his nationalism. He maintained throughout his life that the soldier's calling was an honourable one.

One thing the war years did was to reinforce his admiration for French literature and tradition. When the fighting was over he resumed his studies at Liverpool and gained first class honours in English.

By 1925 he was a lecturer in the Welsh department at University College, Swansea and a member of *Y Mudiad Cymreig* (The Welsh Movement), a small group of academic nationalists who used to meet in a house in Penarth. It was this group that provided the southern contingent at the Pwllheli meeting.

If H.R.Jones was the main instigator of the new party it was mainly Saunders Lewis who provided the intellectual depth and incisive mind to propel Welsh politics in a new direction.

THE BAPTIST MINISTER

Although it was the war that made Lewis Valentine conscious of his nationalism the seed was there from an early age. As a child in Llanddulas near Colwyn Bay he was inspired by the writings of Emrys ap Iwan, a nationalistic minister and polemicist from the same area. After Colwyn Bay Grammar School he went back to his old primary school at Llanddulas as a pupil teacher, and took what was then considered the revolutionary course of speaking to the children in their Welsh mother tongue.

He too had his studies at Bangor interrupted by war. For four and a half years he served in a medical unit that contained several Welsh theological students; this included one year wounded in hospital. Back in Bangor after the war he tried to promote Welshness throughout the University; an unpopular activity at a time when even Welsh was taught through the medium of English. He became a founder of *Cymdeithas y Tair 'G'*, a patriotic literary society which in due course helped to nurture the new political party.

In 1925 he was aged 32 and a Baptist minister at Llandudno, a post he filled for 26 years with one respite in Wormwood Scrubs. Despite becoming the new party's first president and first parliamentary candidate he too was a reluctant politician.

"If Wales had been a free, secure nation," he once said, "I would never have become involved in politics." Most of the six at the Pwllheli meeting would have felt the same.

THE CONGREGATIONAL MINISTER

The Reverend Fred Jones of Treorchy was the elder statesman in the Maesgwyn meeting. Born in 1877 near Llangrannog, Ceredigion, he was the eldest of 11 children in a family of poets who became known as Bois y Cilie. Educated at Newquay and Bangor he became a minister at Rhymney, where he started Welsh classes and tried to re-kindle interest in the Welsh language in that part of Gwent.

After moving to Treorchy in 1917 he decided that it was through participation in local government that the position of Welsh could be strengthened in Rhondda schools. He tried to put this into practice but lost narrowly in two council elections, once to a local publican. He moved to Tal-y-bont in his native county in 1929 and became a Ceredigion councillor.

Fred Jones would have sympathized with the non-violent direct action that became popular with language campaigners two generations later. He supported a plan by H.R.Jones to throw leaflets in the House of Commons in protest against what was perceived as anti-Welsh

public appointments.

The plan was never implemented.

Seventy five years after the Reverend Fred Jones' historic visit to Pwllheli two of his grandsons, Dafydd Iwan and Alun Ffred Jones, are among the leaders of Gwynedd Council. The man who saw local government as one of his country's hopes would have been proud.

THE AGRICULTURAL SCIENTIST

Moses Griffith had come home that day in 1925. Although he lived in Dolgellau by then, he had been brought up on a farm at Edern in Llŷn. Throughout his life he remained a farmer as well as an expert on agriculture.

He too had gone to war in 1914, as a member of the Veterinary Corps. But his service was curtailed by rheumatic fever, and he spent the rest of the war working as an industrial chemist. Going on to study rural science at Bangor he joined *Cymdeithas y Tair 'G'*, his eventual passport to the meeting in Pwllheli.

His glittering career included spells as agricultural adviser for Meirionnydd, pioneer at the Plant Breeding Station in Aberystwyth, civil servant, and private agricultural consultant of international renown. He was elected the Welsh National Party's first treasurer and held the post for many years. A booklet he wrote formed the basis of the party's agricultural policy. At its core was the Danish model based on the family farm, with strong encouragement for cooperative systems. The ideas gained little support in the midst of economic depression but became more acceptable years later.

In a group of political idealists Moses Griffith, with his scientific background, agricultural expertise and interest in economic matters became a key figure in the development of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru.

THE CARPENTER

The least familiar name among the six men of Pwllheli was D.E.Williams. But in a contest of political loyalty and stamina this carpenter from Groeslon near Caernarfon would have been near the top of the league. Described

as one of the lost characters in Plaid Cymru history, he never stopped working for his ideals and was chairman of Hiraethog District Council 40 years after the Pwllheli meeting and five years before his death.

Born in 1897 David Edmund Williams became a carpenter and a shipwright. His ship was sunk twice during the first world war; twice he survived several hours in freezing seas awaiting rescue, which did little for his ailing health.

It was probably through H.R. Jones that he found himself at the Pwllheli meeting. He became a leading activist for the new party until circumstances forced him away from his locality.

During the depression he moved south and became a craft instructor in Merthyr and Ebbw Vale, a job he had to give up through ill health. There followed a fifteen year exile in Essex where his wife Gwladys got a teaching job. They returned to Wales in 1949 when Mrs Williams became head teacher at Capel Garmon, Denbighshire. He fulfilled his ambition of owning a small farm and got elected to the local council until ill-health forced him to retire back to his native Dyffryn Nantlle where he died in 1971.

THE ROAD TO PWLLHELI

If the men who came to Pwllheli had little in common apart from their patriotism, the same was true of the two groups that were amalgamated at that meeting. H.R.Jones, Lewis Valentine, Moses Griffith and D.E.Williams belonged to a Caernarfon-based movement that was already calling itself *Y Blaid Genedlaethol Gymreig* - the Welsh National Party. This was an open, highly public organisation, sometimes laying itself open to ridicule. The southern group represented by Saunders Lewis and Fred Jones ran no such risk. *Y Mudiad Cymreig* - the Welsh Movement - based in Penarth was a secret organisation: so secret that the four from the north were unaware of its existence.

The northern body was the product of several meetings convened by H.R. Jones to form a home rule movement dedicated to the Welsh language. One such meeting, in the Queen's Cafe in Caernarfon in September 1924, had attracted members of the *Tair 'G'* student society including Lewis Valentine and Moses Griffith. It was a disorganised meeting. The Herald newspaper, generally favourable towards home rule, commented:

"Not everyone was agreed about what to strive for.... If the movement for Welsh self government is not more serious and responsible than this meeting the sooner it is brought to an end the better." That meeting decided to call the movement *Byddin Ymreolwyr Cymru* - the Wales Home Rule Army. A title that deterred some potential members, it was changed in a meeting two months later to *Y Blaid Genedlaethol Gymreig* - the Welsh National Party. The same meeting appointed Lewis Valentine as president and H.R.Jones as organiser.

It was obvious however that such a local organisation could not legitimately call itself 'national', and H.R.Jones set about recruiting members from the rest of Wales. It was to this end that he wrote a letter to Saunders Lewis in February 1925 inviting him to become the party's vice-president. Saunders Lewis wrote back setting out conditions for his acceptance.

H.R.Jones knew nothing of Saunders Lewis involvement with *y Mudiad Cymreig*. This group of intellectuals used to meet secretly in the home of Griffith John and Elisabeth Williams in Penarth. Members included Ambrose Bebb, Fred Jones and D.J.Williams. The aim was "to rescue Wales from its present condition and make it a Welsh Wales". The intention was to go public when they had more resources but for the moment their only publicity had been through the columns of an obscure Breton publication.

The subsequent correspondence between Saunders Lewis and H.R. Jones is described in D. Hywel Davies's book *The Welsh Nationalist Party*. Lewis criticized the aims of the northern group as being too vague, and dismissed the call for Welsh Home Rule as meaningless unless properly defined.

Y Mudiad Cymreig was more concerned with extending the use of Welsh through local authorities and breaking all connections with Westminster and English-based parties.

By the time the two factions merged in the Maesgwyn Temperance Saunders Lewis was happy that he had persuaded the northern group to accept his movement's aims without revealing its existence.

THE TEMPERANCE UNION

There was plenty of politics at the Pwllheli Eisteddfod. Tory Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin had been due to address from the stage, but had been detained in London because of the miners' strife. The Eisteddfod Council decided to send a telegram congratulating him on "settling the colliery dispute": a premature decision as it turned out, with the general strike on the horizon.

There was the usual rousing speech from ex-Prime Minister Lloyd George. And a queen came to town, Queen Elizabeth of Rumania, accepted to the Gorsedd as Mari Gwalia and given a rapturous welcome by a crowd of 15,000.

The birth of a political party at the Tuesday afternoon meeting in the Maesgwyn Temperance passed unnoticed. The six pioneers elected Lewis Valentine as president, Moses Griffith as treasurer, H.R. Jones as secretary / organiser, and Saunders Lewis, Fred Jones and D.J.Williams as members of the executive committee. They finalised plans for a public meeting in the town's Baptist chapel the following Thursday. And they decided to hold a summer school in Owain Glyndŵr's Parliament House in Machynneth the following year.

There should have been seven at the meeting. D.J.Williams, a writer and schoolteacher from Fishguard, had missed his train. He was to visit Pwllheli again in 1936 with his friends Lewis Valentine and Saunders Lewis to set fire to the controversial RAF "bombing school" at nearby Penyberth, earning themselves nine months in Wormwood Scrubs. His late arrival on August 5, 1925 is described in a booklet he wrote:

"To my great regret I failed to reach the meeting until it was over, and I met Mr Saunders Lewis on his way to the South on the very train that I had arrived on. In that short interlude by the train I learned two things, first, to my great joy, that the National Party of Wales had that afternoon been established once and for all, with the specific aim of delivering to Wales, in the fullness of time, Self Government and its own parliament, along with all the

recognised privileges of a free nation....

"As that train puffed its way out I learned one other thing, that the new Party's first public meeting was to be held the following Thursday in one of the town's chapels and that I, if you please, the least adequate in the seven shires of the South, was to speak there. However it turned out to be a purposeful enough meeting and nothing worse than that happened there. Meuryn was in the chair, a few words from me, my old friend Val following, and the incomparable Fred Jones, or Frederick the Great as I often greeted him with all justification, bringing it all to a decent and purposeful climax. And thus, more or less, ended the second day in the history of the National Party of Wales."

75 YEARS ON

By the time Gwynfor Evans, Carmarthen MP and Plaid Cymru president, came to Pwllheli in 1975 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary, the party had experienced several highs and lows. The first twenty years was a period of laying foundations. For all his genius and intellect, Saunders Lewis's vision of Wales in a European, Catholic context did not strike a chord among ordinary Welsh people, especially in English speaking areas.

The appeal was broadened during Gwynfor Evans' leadership, especially after his dramatic win in the Carmarthen by-election in 1966.

But it was in the last years of the twentieth century that Plaid Cymru, the Party of Wales, became a force in every corner of the land. Following the Assembly and European elections in 1999, which saw the party neck and neck with Labour, no-one can dispute its claim to call itself truly national.

It is appropriate that this should have happened under the inspirational leadership of Dafydd Wigley, AM and MP for the constituency where the party was founded. Unveiling a plaque in honour of those men who came to Pwllheli in 1925 provides a fitting climax to his period as party president. And as Wales takes faltering steps towards full national democracy we remember the words of H.R.Jones: "It will come. you wait and see, it will come!"

Maes Square, Pwllheli



Y Maes, Pwllheli fel yr edrychai yn nauddegau'r ugeinfed ganrif
Y Maes, Pwllheli as it looked during the 1920s.



Hen lun o siop ledr Lewis (1905), y *Maesgwyn Temperance Hotel* yn ddiweddarach.
Lewis' leather shop, (1905) later to become the Maesgwyn Temperance Hotel.



H. R. Jones



Saunders Lewis



Lewis Valentine



Fred Jones



Moses Griffith



David Edmund Williams



Ysgol Haf gyntaf y Blaid, Machynlleth 1926
Plaid's inaugural summer school held at the Owain Glyndŵr Parliament House, Machynlleth, in August 1926



D. J. Williams



W. Ambrose Bebb



Tri Penyberth a'u cyfreithiwr (E.V. Stanley Jones) yn cydnabod bonlllefau'r dorf ar y ffordd i'r llys.
After the Burning of the Bombing School, the Penyberth Three acknowledge cheering crowds on their way to the Caernarfon Assize Court in October 1936



Rhai o'r miloedd ddaeth i Bafiliwn Caernarfon i groesawu Tri Penyborth o garchar.
*Some of the thousands who packed Caernarfon Pavilion in 1937 to welcome
the Penyborth Three following their release from prison.*