

MORGAN, HYWEL RHODRI (1939 - 2017), politician

Name: Hywel Rhodri Morgan

Date of birth: 1939

Date of death: 2017

Gender: Male

Occupation: politician

Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements

Author: Ioan Phillips

Rhodri Morgan was born on 29 September 1939 in Cardiff, the second son of **Thomas John ('T.J.')** Morgan, a university lecturer, and his wife Huana (née Rees, 1906-2005), a teacher. His older brother Prys was born in 1937. The family had a strong academic and political heritage. Huana's father, John Rees, was a parish councillor in Swansea, while her grandfather, Thomas, had been a leading figure in the radical tenant farmers' movement. T.J. was not politically active, but his background in academia meant he knew several prominent intellectuals active in the Labour movement - most notably the economist, **Hilary Marquand**.

Although Rhodri's home village, Radyr, was spared the worst privations of the Second World War, his early years were far from straightforward. A sickly infant, Rhodri nearly died from pneumonia in the winter of 1942. However, the rest of Rhodri's childhood was, as brother Prys recalls, 'full of laughter and jokes'. The Morgan siblings attended the council-run Radyr School. This marked them out from many of their contemporaries, who attended the Cathedral School - a private school in neighbouring Llandaff. It was at Radyr that the first signs of Rhodri's intellectual precocity emerged, with the younger Morgan brother fast tracked two years to the same class as Prys. Rhodri completed his secondary education at Whitchurch Grammar School, where he won an Open Exhibition to read Modern Languages at St John's College, Oxford. Both brothers went up to St John's in the same year, but Oxford did little for Rhodri. Disillusioned with Modern Languages, he switched to Politics, Philosophy, and Economics (PPE) after just two terms. He also disdained the stilted formalities and pretensions of college life, later recalling how he felt greater affinity with an elderly porter than the college President. Nonetheless, he graduated with second-class honours - enough to take him to Harvard to study a master's in Government.

On returning from Harvard in the summer of 1963 Morgan found a job with the Worker's Education Association (WEA). Later that year, he joined the Labour Party - and it was through the party that he met his future wife, Julie Edwards (born 1944). They married on 22 April, 1967, following a three-year courtship buttressed by activism and campaigning.

Two decades elapsed between Morgan leaving the WEA and becoming an MP. Yet the journey for other WEA alumni, like his former flatmate - and future Labour leader - Neil Kinnock, was far quicker. The explanation for this lay in Morgan's desire to make time for his growing family: the arrivals of daughters, Mari and Siani, were soon rounded off by the adoption of a son, Stuart. Stints as a research officer for local and central government (1965-71), an economic adviser to the Department of Trade (1972-74), an industrial development officer for South Glamorgan County Council (1974-80), and the European Commission's head of press in Wales (1980-87) allowed him to remain in Cardiff, while also ensuring his continued involvement in politics - albeit as an impartial civil servant.

The lure of party politics was too strong, though. In 1985, Julie was elected to South Glamorgan County Council - something that spurred Rhodri into seeking a parliamentary seat. He eventually set his sights on Cardiff West which by then included his home village of Radyr. In the 1987 general election he won the seat from the Conservatives by more than 4,000 votes. The press were quickly enamoured with the loquacious newcomer from Cardiff. *The Times* reviewed the maiden speeches of the 1987 intake, awarding joint-first place to Rhodri Morgan.

The rest of Morgan's first year as an MP was dominated by committee work, serving on the Standing Committee for the Housing Bill, the Steel Privatisation Bill, and the annual Finance Bill. His scrutineering nous was rewarded with a place in the Shadow Energy team.

The 1992-97 Parliament was tougher for Morgan - now a junior shadow Wales minister. The sheen of being a new MP had worn off, while he was acutely aware of his testy relationships with prominent figures around new party leader, Tony Blair. Consequently, Morgan was a peripheral figure in high-level party discussions about devolution.

When Labour won its landslide victory in the 1997 general election, it was expected that Rhodri Morgan would get a frontbench role in the Welsh Office. The omission from Blair's frontbench was a big disappointment, but it gave his career a fillip, both locally and nationally. His parliamentary peers rallied in support, electing him to the chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), a position which he used to discomfit the Blair government over its relationship with Formula One magnate, Bernie Ecclestone and its use of spin. These efforts gained Rhodri Morgan *The Spectator's* Inquisitor of the Year gong in 1998.

However, the narrow Yes vote in Wales's 1997 devolution referendum opened up a career path away from Westminster. Always an ardent devolutionist, Rhodri was intent on leading Labour in the new assembly. In 1998, he ran against the Secretary of State for Wales, Ron Davies, for leadership of the party in Wales. Davies won, but was torpedoed by his infamous 'moment of madness' on Clapham Common. Downing Street drafted in Davies's successor as Secretary of State, Alun Michael - a reliable Blairite - to block Rhodri Morgan. Millbank's superior financial and political heft told: Morgan was defeated for a second time.

Michael could not shake the perception that he was 'Blair's poodle'. This hurt Labour in the inaugural Assembly elections in 1999 - especially in its traditional heartlands of the South Wales Valleys. While Michael ended up as First Secretary, he did so as the head of a minority government. In an attempt to fend off internal dissent, Michael offered Morgan the economic development portfolio.

The issue dominating exchanges in the first months of the Assembly was whether the additional £300 million a year earmarked for West Wales and the Valleys by the European Union (EU) - more commonly known as Objective One funding - would be matched by extra money from the Treasury. The absence of any pledge on match funding from London led to the opposition parties launching a no-confidence vote against Alun Michael. He resigned before they could vote on the motion.

Rhodri Morgan was unanimously nominated as Michael's replacement by the Cabinet. 'The job sort of fell into my lap,' he later reflected (Morgan, 180). Even Tony Blair was compelled to pay homage to Labour's new leader in Wales. But there was no jubilation from the new First Secretary. Morgan was acutely aware of Labour's weak numerical position in the Assembly and of the public scepticism towards the new institution (Morgan, 182). He demonstrated little hesitation in taking Labour into coalition with the Welsh Liberal Democrats. Their then-leader in the Assembly, Michael German, saw the deal reflecting these political realities: 'It was important to show the people of Wales that [their] politicians could work together.'

Morgan succeeded in ending the internecine party games that reduced the Assembly to a national joke, while his government's response to outbreaks of flooding and foot-and-mouth convinced hitherto-hostile observers that 'we in Wales could deal with things by ourselves' (Carwyn Jones). This impression was reinforced by the change in Rhodri Morgan's official title to 'First Minister'.

Morgan used his retitled office to provide clear-sighted leadership following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Aware of their potential to ferment ethnic and religious tensions in Wales, he quickly brought leaders of all faith communities together in formal partnership. That arrangement - now known as the Faith Communities Forum - endures to this day.

With devolution earning its spurs in crisis management, Rhodri wanted an authentically 'Welsh' iteration of self-government. His vision was 'Clear Red Water', articulated in a keynote speech at Swansea University in December 2002 - although Rhodri's idiosyncratic delivery technique, which usually eschewed a pre-prepared script, meant he actually forgot to utter the phrase on the night. The creed repudiated New Labour's competition-driven approach, arguing that Wales's distinctive demographic and economic needs were best met by communitarianism. 'It means doing things the Welsh way,' Rhodri asserted.

Clear Red Water's influence was discernible in the Labour manifesto for the 2003 Assembly elections, with flagship promises to abolish prescription charges and to avoid imposing top-up university tuition fees. The document certainly had greater resonance with Welsh voters than the party's London-dictated 1999 effort. A two-point swing to Labour meant Rhodri Morgan was back for a second term - this time, as the head of a majority administration.

The political capital from Rhodri's election victory was soon expended on party management over reforms to the devolution settlement proposed by the Richard Commission, which reported in March 2004. It recommended primary law-making powers for Wales - but left the question of how these were implemented 'for politicians.' Devosceptic Labour MPs railed against what they saw as the diminution of their role in Westminster. Pro-devolution advocates retorted that primary powers should be

brought in without recourse to a referendum. Morgan - having spoken of the need for 'organic' devolution - was broadly satisfied with the resultant compromise in the *Government of Wales Act 2006*. Under the act, 'Legislative Competence Orders' (LCOs) gave the Assembly the right to draft bills, which would then go before Parliament. If there were no objections, the Assembly was free to legislate. In one sense, LCOs marked a step forward. Until their introduction, the Assembly could only pass secondary legislation or request Parliament pass a law on its behalf. However, veto power still ultimately resided with Westminster.

This focus on constitutional technicalities came at the expense of other issues, such as healthcare waiting lists. These featured heavily in the 2007 Assembly elections - Rhodri Morgan's last as First Minister. Before the contest, he committed to standing down 'well before' the end of the third Assembly. The decision was motivated by his desire not to go 'on and on' and to 'have a retirement, preferably lasting years rather than months' (Morgan, 285-98).

It initially appeared Rhodri Morgan's retirement would come sooner than anticipated. Labour lost four seats, opening the door to a so-called 'Rainbow Coalition' between Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives, and the Welsh Liberal Democrats. *The Times* even published an article on the supposedly imminent installation of Plaid's leader, Ieuan Wyn Jones, as the new First Minister.

However, following a fraught internal debate the Welsh Liberal Democrats abandoned the Rainbow Coalition. Morgan's political nous kicked in, and amidst the debris and recriminations of the abortive Rainbow Coalition, he got the Assembly to confirm him as First Minister of a minority Labour administration. He then turned his energies to cementing a pact with Labour's nationalist opponents, Plaid Cymru. This was - to his surprise - backed by an overwhelming majority of Labour members. Two months after an inconclusive election, Wales had a new government - one that long-standing confidant, Mike Sullivan, said reflected the 'red and green' strands of Rhodri Morgan's political philosophy. Morgan maintained that, rather than being a 'crypto-Nat', he was simply an enthusiastic advocate for the 'middle-ground filled by devolution' (Morgan, 332).

Morgan felt the stress of coalition negotiations contributed to his heart scare just days after coalition negotiations concluded. He took this as a sign to stop working so hard, shed 30 pounds in weight and took up walking. He stepped down as First Minister in December 2009 and was succeeded by Carwyn Jones - whom he would often affectionately refer to as 'bachgen'. Never one for grandiloquent retrospection, he concluded his final First Minister's Questions by remarking how much he was looking forward to spending more time in his garden at Michaelston-le-Pit and watching his grandchildren play sport.

Morgan remained an Assembly Member until 2011 - long enough to see Wales vote resoundingly in favour of primary law-making powers. For ex-special adviser, Mark Drakeford, the result was 'indicative of how Rhodri's decade in office helped overcome initial scepticism towards devolution.' Rhodri's brother, Prys, agrees: '[he] felt it a very personal endorsement'.

Rhodri's retirement was, as Julie put it, 'so full and so fulfilled.' Alongside grandfatherly and horticultural duties, he served as the chancellor of Swansea University, and also regularly went canvassing for Julie in her Cardiff North Assembly seat.

When Rhodri Morgan died of a heart attack on 17 May 2017, he was swiftly eulogised as 'father of the nation'. As if to underscore this epithet, his funeral - a humanist ceremony which was held on 31 May 2017 at the Assembly - attracted hundreds of public spectators, who stood for hours to pay tribute to their former First Minister. Julie Morgan believes Rhodri would probably have laughed at such a description - not least because 'he did not really [ever] take much notice of what commentators said!' Yet it is hard to escape the conclusion that without Rhodri's careful cultivation, the fragile shoots of devolution would have failed to take root - and Wales' comfortability with self-government today serves as an enduring reminder of this. In that sense, every Welsh citizen is a child of Rhodri.

Author

Ioan Phillips

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Wikipedia Article: [Rhodri Morgan](#)

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