

DONNELLY, DESMOND LOUIS (1920-1974), politician and writer

Name: Desmond Louis Donnelly
Date of birth: 1920
Date of death: 1974
Gender: Male
Occupation: politician and writer
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: John Graham Jones

He was born on 16 October 1920 at Gohaingaon, Sibsagar, Assam, India, the second son of Louis James Donnelly, a tea planter of Irish extraction, and Florence Aimée Tucker (died 1968), the daughter of an English Indian Civil Service family. Donnelly was taken by his mother to England in 1928 (subsequently losing contact with his father). He received his education at Brightlands School, Newnham-on-Severn, Gloucestershire, and Bembridge School on the Isle-of-Wight. He was much influenced by the ideas of William Morris and joined the Labour League of Youth while still in his teens. He left school in 1938 and worked as an office-boy at London. In his youth he was also a keen player of cricket and rugby football. He became secretary of the London Grasshoppers Rugby Club on leaving school. At the age of 17 he set up the 'British Empire Cricket XI' which continued through the war years and established an excellent standard of cricket, and raised funds for the Duke of Gloucester's Red Cross and the St John fund. He first joined the Labour Party in 1936.

At the outbreak of World War II Donnelly joined the Royal Air Force and served with the rank of flying-officer (Bomber Command) and later in Italy as acting flight-lieutenant (desert air force). After the war he lectured at the Royal Air Force Staff College, 1945-46, and he was later appointed assistant editor (and eventually editor) of *Town and Country Planning*. He then served as director of the Town and Country Planning Association, 1948-50. In the general election of July 1945 he stood unsuccessfully as the Commonwealth Party (an idealistic socialist party generally regarded to be to the left of the Labour Party) candidate for the Evesham division of Worcestershire, and then re-joined the Labour Party in the following September. He was the Labour candidate in a by-election in the County Down constituency in 1946 when he was the impressive runner-up to the successful Ulster Unionist. Finally, in February 1950, he captured Pembrokeshire by just 129 votes from the sitting 'Liberal' MP **Gwilym Lloyd George**. Donnelly had succeeded in taking advantage of radical sentiment in the highly marginal constituency and of local Liberal disapproval of **Lloyd George's** over-close association with the Conservative Party. Donnelly built up a considerable personal following in the county, where many admired his enormous energy, organisational skills and a genial personal style which easily captured support and votes. While an MP, he still acted as adviser to the engineering firm David Brown, to Philips Industries, and to Hill Samuel in order to increase his personal income.

In parliament Donnelly became a Bevanite from 1951 and also a close confidant of **Hugh Dalton**. He grew to support German rearmament and became increasingly absorbed in international issues, forming an array of friendships with figures like Willy Brandt and the Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith. Travels to eastern Europe and China served to increase his anti-Communism which is powerfully reflected in such works as *The March Wind: Explorations behind the Iron Curtain* (1959) and *Struggle for the World: the Cold War from its Origins in 1917* (1965). He also acted as political columnist for the *Daily Herald*, 1959-63, and chief political correspondent for the *News of the World*, 1967-70. Donnelly's intense dislike of Harold Wilson was well-known and, predictably, he actively supported George Brown in the Labour Party leadership contest of 1963. Wilson's election saw Donnelly inevitably condemned to the backbenches, fulfilling the role of a backbench maverick, ever ready to rock the Labour Party boat at the least provocation. He joined forces with another maverick Labour MP, Woodrow Wyatt, in opposing their party's plans to nationalize the steel industry. Consequently, further dejected by his party's foreign policies, Donnelly resigned the Labour whip on 18 January 1968 and was expelled from the party nine weeks later on 9 March 1968.

In June 1969 Desmond Donnelly founded his own United Democratic Party which urged as its policies the abolition of the welfare state, the re-introduction of national service, capital punishment and flogging. At the June 1970 general election Donnelly and four other party candidates were all defeated, although he himself polled no fewer than 11,824 votes in Pembrokeshire, coming a good third in the constituency. Nicholas Edwards captured Pembrokeshire for the Conservative Party. In April of the following year, without warning his colleagues in the UDP, Donnelly himself joined the Conservative Party, explaining that the Conservative Party closely reflected his views on the reform of the law relating to trades unions and EEC entry, and he attended the Conservative Party conference that October as a delegate from the cities of London and Westminster. But he conspicuously failed to secure nomination as a party candidate in the Hove by-election in 1973 or as the party candidate for the Melton constituency in the general election of February 1974. He was chairman of ICP5 Ltd, 1972-74 and managing director of Practical Europe Ltd., 1973-74. In the recession of 1973 and 1974, his companies struggled financially and this, together with his failure to get back into the House of Commons as a Conservative, caused serious depression. Severely clinically depressed, he took his own life in a hotel bedroom at West Drayton near Heathrow Airport on 4 April 1974.

He married in 1947 Rosemary Taggart, daughter of William John Taggart MD of Belfast. They had one son and two daughters. Their constituency home was at Pant-y-Beudy near Goodwick in Pembrokeshire. Their London home was Flat 16, 88 Portland Place, London. Donnelly's personality was unfailingly colourful and vivacious, he enjoyed a full private life and was immensely knowledgeable about cricket. In politics he was the eternal maverick, something of the proverbial 'rogue elephant', capable of quite excessive enthusiasms and gripping oratorical flights of fancy. He had published extensively, including a number of monographs; he had also travelled widely and had a wide circle of international friends and acquaintances. Donnelly was noted for moving from the left to the right wing and for his resistance to following party lines (he was a member of four different political parties during the course of his career, and moved between parties on five occasions).

Authors

Dr John Graham Jones

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Sources

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Further Reading

NLW Archives: [1959 General Election Souvenir... No Gains without Pains. The Political Challenge of the Welfare State. Desmond Donnelly, M.P.](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Desmond Donnelly](#)

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