

GRIFFITHS, JAMES (JEREMIAH) (1890-1975), Labour politician and cabinet minister

Name: James (Jeremiah) Griffiths
Date of birth: 1890
Date of death: 1975
Parent: Margaret Griffiths (née Morris)
Parent: William Griffiths
Gender: Male
Occupation: Labour politician and cabinet minister
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: John Graham Jones

He was born at Betws, Ammanford on 19 September 1890, the youngest of the ten children of William Griffiths, a colliery blacksmith, and Margaret Morris. One of his brothers was the celebrated Welsh poet **Amanwy** (David Rhys Griffiths, died December 1953). He attended Betws board school, Ammanford, 1896-1903, and spoke only Welsh until he was five years old. He began work in a local anthracite colliery at the age of thirteen years. Formative influences during his youth included the religious revival of 1904-5 and powerful political left-wing undercurrents. In 1907 he was appointed the local branch secretary to the South Wales Miners' Federation. In 1908 Griffiths became a founder member and secretary of the new ILP branch at Ammanford, and in 1916 he was chosen secretary of the Ammanford Trades and Labour Council. He campaigned powerfully against British involvement in World War I.

Griffiths studied at the Marxist Central Labour College, 1919-21, at the same time as **Aneurin Bevan** and **Morgan Phillips**. He then returned to the coalface, and spent four nights a week giving classes in economics and industrial history. During the inter-war period he quickly rose to prominence within the South Wales Miners' Federation. In 1926 he took up a position as miners' agent in the anthracite district (Ammanford no.1) and was inevitably centre-stage at the time of the general strike and the long subsequent lock-out in the coal industry. His experience of the long-term suffering in the south Wales mining communities scarred him deeply. In 1932 Griffiths was elected vice-president of the SWMF and then became its president in 1934-still at the relatively young age of forty-four. He faced an uphill struggle because of the sharp fall in the membership of the 'Fed.' and the necessity to negotiate an increase in the subsistence wage paid to working coalminers. The SWMF successfully repelled the menacing challenge of the so-called blackleg 'Spencer' company unionism. He also served as JP for Breconshire.

But political life still held centre-stage in his affections. He had joined the Independent Labour Party as early as 1905 and he served as secretary to the Ammanford Trades Council, 1916-19. He served as Labour Party agent in the Llanelli constituency, 1922-25, and was a local miners' agent, 1925-36 to the Anthracite Miners' Association. In a by-election in March 1936 Griffiths succeeded Dr J. H. Williams as the Labour MP for Llanelli with a majority of 16,221 votes and he continued to represent the constituency in parliament until his retirement in June 1970. At Westminster Griffiths soon made his voice heard in denouncing the means test, attacking the coalowners, and advocating the extension of the social insurance scheme. He quickly became recognised as a fervent and forceful debater in the House of Commons, and in 1939 was elected to the NEC of the Labour Party-a remarkably rapid progression. In the general election of 1945 his majority exceeded 34,000 votes, the second highest in the whole of Britain. He served continuously as a member for his party's NEC for twenty years. In 1942 he was appointed secretary to the Welsh Parliamentary Party. From his first election he spoke regularly in the House of Commons on social questions, Welsh affairs and international matters. In February 1943 Griffiths moved the Labour Party motion pressing the war-time coalition government to accept the proposals of the Beveridge Report. In 1945 Attlee appointed him to be the Minister of National Insurance in which position he collaborated with **Aneurin Bevan**, the Minister of Health, in laying the foundations of the welfare state. In this position Griffiths was responsible for three key measures: the introduction of the payment of family allowances in early 1946, the passage of the 1946 National Insurance Act (which created a comprehensive system of social security), and the passage of the 1948 Industrial Injuries Act. He also served as chairman of the Labour Party, 1948-49, and remained a prominent member of the party's national executive. In the general election of February 1950, his majority at Llanelli was 31,626 votes-the fourth biggest in the whole of the UK and the highest in Wales.

After the Labour Party was returned to government in February 1950, Jim Griffiths became Secretary of State for the Colonies. In this position he helped to draft new constitutions for emerging colonial countries like Nigeria and Singapore, became involved in deciding the future constitution of Kenya, and pressed strongly for the setting up of a Central African Federation. He was seriously considered for promotion to become Foreign Secretary in the spring of 1951 but eventually lost out to Herbert Morrison. In 1955 he was elected at the top of the poll among the candidates for the Shadow Cabinet. During Labour's years of opposition, 1951-64, Jim Griffiths fulfilled a useful role as a mediator between the party's left and right wings and remained on the national executive. He was a member of the PLP Parliamentary Committee, 1951-59. He was then elected as deputy leader of the Labour Party in 1955, having defeated **Aneurin Bevan** by 141 votes by 111 in the election for the position. He continued in that position, being re-elected each year, from 1956-59, when he was succeeded by **Bevan**, and Griffiths supported George Brown (rather than Harold Wilson) in the strenuously fought 1963 party leadership contest. In 1952 he was appointed a member of the advisory council to the BBC, and he remained a firm advocate of temperance throughout his life.

Throughout his political career Griffiths had proved generally supportive of concessions to Welsh nationhood and devolution and it was partly due to his influence on Hugh Gaitskell that the Labour Party had included in its 1959 party manifesto a policy commitment to appoint a Secretary of State for Wales. He was the opposition spokesman on Welsh affairs, 1959-64. He was the obvious choice to become the first 'Charter Secretary of State for Wales' in October 1964, with a seat in the Labour cabinet, serving until March 1966, although now in his mid-seventies. His successor in the office was **Cledwyn Hughes**. In 1969 Griffiths published a somewhat guarded volume of reminiscences *Pages from Memory*. During the late 1960s, although increasingly unwell, he was cajoled by Harold Wilson not to retire from parliament and thus cause yet another risky by-election in a south Wales division where the potentially strong, attractive Plaid Cymru candidate was to be the rugby international **Carwyn James**. But in May 1967 Griffiths announced that he would not stand for re-election to parliament at the next general election.

Griffiths married on 19 October 1918 Winifred (' Winnie ') Rutley (1895-1982), daughter of William Rutley of Overton in Hampshire. She penned a slim volume of

reminiscences *One Woman's Story* (1979). They lived at first at various places within in the anthracite coalfield, but moved to Putney Heath in 1945. They had two sons and two daughters. He became a PC in 1945, and was appointed CH in 1966. He was also awarded the degree of LL.D. honoris causa by the University of Wales in 1946. He read widely, both literature and history, and followed rugby football. He could always regale his friends with enthralling stories of life in south Wales, especially in the coalfield. Griffiths died at his Teddington home on 7 August 1975 and was buried at Ammanford following a funeral service at the Christian Temple, Ammanford.

Griffiths had brought to the British Labour movement a warm and generous personality, with a passion for social justice which lifted him above the striving of rival factions. He possessed a solidity which marked him out as an influence for peace, reconciliation and moderation. His political speeches could be sentimental, but were unflinchingly sincere, and consequently he commanded widespread respect and affection in the Labour Party and among colleagues in all political parties.

Author

Dr John Graham Jones

Sources

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