

THOMAS, THOMAS GEORGE, Viscount Tonypandy (1909-1997), Labour politician and Speaker of the House of Commons

Name: Thomas George Thomas

Date of birth: 1909

Date of death: 1997

Gender: Male

Occupation: Labour politician and Speaker of the House of Commons

Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements

Author: John Graham Jones

He was born on 29 January 1909 at Port Talbot, the son of Zachariah Thomas (1881-1925), a coalminer and native of Carmarthen, and Emma Jane (1881-1972), the daughter of John Tilbury of Lanfield, Hampshire. His father was a drunkard who deserted his wife, leaving her to bring up five children alone. He was then raised by his mother in the village of Trealaw just across the river from the town of Tonypandy. He was a pupil at Tonypandy Grammar School, 1920-27, and then became an uncertificated teacher at Dagenham before taking a teacher training course at the University of Southampton, 1929-31.

He had joined the Labour Party as a youth back in 1924 and had delivered his first political speech at the age of eighteen, to the Women's Co-operative Guild of Tonypandy. He also became a member of the Cardiff Co-operative Party. He secured employment as a young schoolmaster at Rockingham Street School, Elephant and Castle, Lambeth, often spending his leisure hours frequenting the Strangers' Gallery of the House of Commons and avidly listening to the debates in the House at a crucial time in the country's history during the economic and political crises of 1931 at the height of the severe inter-war depression. The atmosphere and magnificence of the Palace of Westminster captured him for life. In 1936 he led a hunger march from Tonypandy to Cardiff.

Also, at Central Hall, Westminster his Methodism developed and he soon became a Methodist lay-preacher. He was to be President of the National Brotherhood Movement in 1955 and vice-president of the Methodist Conference in 1960-61. His second career as a Methodist lay-preacher extending for over forty years was to take him to almost every town in Wales and even to the United States.

Thomas entered political life via the National Union of Teachers, and, declared medically unfit for active service during World War II, he was elected to the executive of the NUT in 1942, serving until 1945. He was also president of the Cardiff Teachers' Association. He joined the Special Constabulary during the war years, rising to the rank of sergeant. He fought Cardiff Central in the general election of July 1945 and entered parliament on the Labour high tide of that year. In his maiden speech he advocated reform of the leasehold housing law which was a source of great grievance in Wales. He continued to represent Cardiff Central until 1950 and subsequently Cardiff West from 1950 until 1983.

Initially in his parliamentary career he was seen as a left-winger. He was the chair of the Welsh PLP, 1950-51, and was elected the first chairman of the Welsh Grand Committee on its formation in 1951. He was a PPS to Lord Ogmere, the Minister of Civil Aviation in July-November 1951, and a member of the Speaker's Panel of Chairmen of the House of Commons, 1951-64. He was chairman of the Welsh Parliamentary Party, 1958-59. He opposed the re-introduction of conscription and, as a left-winger within the Labour Party, in 1955 he voted for **Aneurin Bevan** (rather than Hugh Gaitskell) to become party leader. In 1960 he was the author of *The Christian Heritage in Politics*.

He fervently opposed reform of the Sunday drinking laws and he campaigned actively for leasehold reform, a burning issue in south Wales as many miners' homes were in danger of reverting to the ownership of the coalowners. Success eventually came with legislation passed in 1967. Thomas had felt so strongly about the issue that at one time he had taken a stall in Cardiff market to publicize the cause. There was a real possibility that Thomas, by now regarded as an accomplished chairman, might have become deputy speaker of the Commons when Harold Wilson became prime minister in October 1964. Instead, he became a junior minister at the Home Office, October 1964-April 1966, and then the Welsh Office, April 1966-January 1967 (famously visiting the scene of the Aberfan disaster in October 1966), and the Foreign Office, January 1967-April 1968.

He served as the third Secretary of State for Wales, April 1968-June 1970, proudly presiding over the investiture of the Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle in July 1969. In this connection he worked amicably with the Duke of Norfolk, Earl Marshall of England. Thomas revelled in all the pageantry. He was virulently opposed to the revival of Welsh nationalism so apparent during these years (against which he frequently spoke out without mincing his words), and also expressed vocal doubts over the expanding role of the EEC. He was chief opposition spokesman on Wales, 1970-74. He became a Privy Counsellor in 1968 and was awarded the Freedom of the Borough of the Rhondda in 1970.

Thomas fully expected to be re-appointed to the position of Secretary of State for Wales when the Labour Party returned to government at the height of the miners' strike in February 1974 (and may well have been told by Wilson that the position was his for the taking), but Harold Wilson, fully aware of his attitude to Welsh nationalism, chose in his place the more moderate and emollient figure of John Morris, long-serving MP for Aberavon. He had been severely shaken, too, by the death in 1972 of his beloved Mam, herself a figure of some consequence throughout south Wales. She had featured regularly in her son's conversation, speeches and election addresses. These experiences prompted thoughts of retirement, but Wilson, anxious to encourage his loyal friend and supporter, offered him the position of deputy speaker of the House of Commons and Chairman of Ways and Means.

In February 1976 he was to succeed Selwyn Lloyd as Speaker of the House of Commons. By temperament and experience, Thomas was ideally suited to these positions. Against all the expectations, he also made a real effort to be fair and impartial to MPs of all parties in the Commons. His public standing, and indeed popularity, increased as a result from April 1978 of the radio (and later television) broadcasting of the proceedings of the House of Commons, although, ironically, Thomas had initially voiced his opposition to the radio broadcasting of parliament. His natural dry wit, easy charm and love of people and the procedures of parliament made him a media star almost

overnight.

He occupied the Speaker's chair at a particularly fraught and unusually unruly period at Westminster which witnessed the full force of Margaret Thatcher as the radical right-wing Conservative Party leader, the difficult **James Callaghan** premiership, the Lib-Lab pact of 1977-78 and the formation of the Social Democratic Party (a break away from the Labour Party) in 1981. Throughout, George Thomas was determined to protect the rights of the House of Commons, an attitude which often strained his erstwhile friendship with former Labour colleagues, notably Jim Callaghan, his fellow Cardiff MP. His enemies readily asserted that he had become too much of an establishment figure, his relations with Mrs Thatcher too cordial, even after she had become Prime Minister in May 1979. Passions reached their height at the time of the Falklands War in 1982. Further criticism stemmed from George Thomas's obvious regard for the trappings of royalty and individual members of the Royal Family, especially Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother and the Prince and Princess of Wales. He was clearly overjoyed at being invited to read the lesson at the marriage of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer at St Paul's Cathedral in July 1981. Generally, however, he still retained the affection of the country at large and was considered by some fellow politicians as one who had done much to restore the authority and dignity of the office of Speaker.

There was widespread regret at Thomas's decision to retire at the general election of 1983, dented only slightly at his decision to accept a hereditary peerage from Mrs Thatcher. It was one of the last creations of a hereditary peerage. He then became an active cross-bencher in the House of Lords, winning widespread public sympathy for his battle against a cancer of the throat which later spread to the stomach. He served as chairman of the National Children's Home, served as president of the British Heart Foundation, supported a large number of charities and worthy causes, and continued to preach, lecture and publish.

His memoirs, which were published in 1985, provoked some controversy, particularly with regard to his relationship with the successive Labour Party leaders and fellow Welsh Labour MPs Jim Callaghan and **Michael Foot** and other parliamentary colleagues like **Cledwyn Hughes**. His writing about them was less than charitable. In 1986 he published the much less controversial volume *My Wales*. He was also the chairman of the Bank of Wales, 1989-91, founded by his close friend **Sir Julian Hodge**. He travelled widely, receiving recognition and honours from around the world. He was also the recipient of a large number of honorary degrees from British universities and freedoms from local authorities.

Although he never formally broke with the Labour Party, he clearly had little love for its proceedings and leading personalities. He remained generally opposed to European integration. During the last months of his long life he was vehemently opposed to the idea of a European single currency (an attitude which caused him to lend some support to Sir James Goldsmith's Referendum Party). As in 1979, he predictably opposed devolution in the 1997 referendum campaign, becoming president of the Campaign against a Welsh Assembly, and, in fact died on 23 September 1997 just four days after the extremely narrow 'Yes' vote in the ballot. He was cremated at Thornhill Crematorium, Cardiff. He had spent years battling against cancer, but continued carrying out public engagements until very shortly before his death and remaining generally good-humoured and active until the end of his long life. A large collection of his political papers is in the custody of the National Library of Wales.

Although he was twice engaged, George Thomas never married. The title consequently lapsed at his death.

Author

Dr John Graham Jones

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Wikipedia Article: [George Thomas, 1st Viscount Tonypandy](#)

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