

HOOSON, HUGH EMLYN (1925-2012), Liberal politician and public figure

Name: Hugh Emlyn Hooson
Date of birth: 1925
Date of death: 2012
Gender: Male
Occupation: Liberal politician and public figure
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: John Graham Jones

Emlyn Hooson was born on 26 March 1925, the son of Hugh and Elsie Hooson of Colomendy, Denbighshire, to a notable local family. He was educated at Denbigh Grammar School and the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, where he graduated in law in 1949. (He was years later to be appointed a Professorial Fellow of Aberystwyth University in 1997). In 1950 he married Shirley Margaret Wynne Hamer, the daughter of Sir George Hamer, CBE, of Llanidloes, a prominent and influential figure in the locality and a powerful Liberal in the politics of Montgomeryshire where he served as its Lord Lieutenant. There were to be two daughters of the marriage, Sioned and Lowri, both educated at the Welsh School at London, where their father became the chairman of the Governing Body. He had served in the Royal Navy (Fleet Air Arm) from 1943 until 1946, serving on a corvette in the north Atlantic. He was a native Welsh speaker, and a fervent supporter of Welsh causes and the national rights of Wales throughout his life.

Emlyn Hooson was called to the Bar at Grays Inn in 1949, and was appointed QC in 1960 at the age of just 35, the youngest such appointment for decades. (He subsequently became a Bencher of Grays Inn in 1968, and served as Vice-Treasurer there in 1985, and Treasurer in 1986). His especial strengths before a judge and jury were the thoroughness of his preparation, the clarity and sharpness of his arguments, and his ability to get to the heart of any legal argument - together with his persuasive, attractive personality. As QC, Hooson represented Ian Brady, one of the 'Moors Murderers' along with Myra Hindley, when Brady was tried and convicted on three murder charges at Chester Crown Court in spring 1966. In 1970 he appeared for the Ministry of Defence at a public inquiry over plans to move its experimental range from Shoeburyness to Pembrey, near Carmarthen. He was the Deputy Chairman of the Flintshire Quarter Sessions, 1960-72, Deputy Chairman of the Merionethshire Quarter Sessions, 1960-67, and then its Chairman, 1967-72. He was appointed Recorder of Merthyr Tydfil early in 1971 and Recorder of Swansea in July of the same year. He was elected Leader of the Wales and Chester Circuit, 1971-74.

Hooson was elected Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire at a keenly contested by-election in May 1962 caused by the death of the former party leader Clement Edward Davies. His initial majority there was a surprisingly high 7549 votes. He had trebled the Liberals' majority in the by-election, at a stroke dispelling the widely held local myth that Clement Davies had been the beneficiary of a most substantial personal vote in Montgomeryshire. Having first been adopted as the Liberal candidate for Lloyd George's old seat the Caernarvon Boroughs (which was then abolished by the Boundary Commissioners in 1948), Emlyn Hooson had already contested Conway unsuccessfully for the party in the general elections of both 1950, when he lost to the Labour candidate, and 1951, when he was defeated by a Conservative. During the early 1960s the Liberal Party was experiencing something of a minor national revival encapsulated above all in a sensational victory in the Orpington by-election in March 1962. Although he continued his professional activities as a barrister (a preoccupation which invited sharp criticism from some sections of the party), Emlyn Hooson was much involved in the revival and re-organisation of his party in Wales in the mid-1960s. He was (in striking contrast to his party leader Jo Grimond) doggedly determined that the Liberals should reach no formal agreement with Harold Wilson's Labour Government elected in October 1964, and he imaginatively depicted a distinct future for the Liberal Party as 'a radical, non-Socialist party in Britain'.

Subsequently, as a warm admirer of Lyndon Johnson's Appalachian Bill in the USA, Emlyn Hooson devoted his energies to preparing a Liberal economic plan for Wales. He was also much involved in the negotiations which preceded the setting up in September 1966 of the independent Welsh Liberal Party, a step which he applauded with gusto, and he then served devotedly as chairman of the new party until 1979. During the 1960s, he was very conscious of a seemingly ever more menacing Plaid Cymru challenge. On 1 March 1967 he introduced in the House of Commons a Government of Wales Bill which proposed a domestic Parliament for Wales. He also introduced in the Commons a succession of measures to tackle depopulation, and various bills in support of the Welsh language. He resolutely refused to countenance any kind of agreement or electoral pact with Plaid Cymru. He had meanwhile stood unsuccessfully against Jeremy Thorpe and Eric Lubbock for the party leadership in January 1967 following Jo Grimond's retirement. Defeat on the first ballot saw Hooson give his support to Thorpe on the second, but he was never to be a strong supporter of Thorpe as party leader.

Emlyn Hooson retained Montgomeryshire in five successive general elections, winning a handsome majority of 4651 votes in the election of February 1974. From 1966, when Elystan Morgan defeated Roderic Bowen in Cardiganshire, until February 1974, he had been the only parliamentary representative of Welsh Liberalism. Most of his English colleagues viewed him as a conservative-minded Liberal confined mainly to the Welsh political stage, and consequently somewhat remote from the Westminster vortex. But on occasion Hooson did adopt a notably progressive stand on domestic matters, and he was undoubtedly the most fervent assailant within the Parliamentary Liberal Party of the centralising measures of the Heath government. He encapsulated the progressive Welsh Liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s, looking increasingly to the 'second coming' of the Liberal Party in Wales as a worthy successor to the disintegrating Labour Party. At the same time he remained a warm admirer of Lloyd George and the radical 'Yellow Book' proposals of the late 1920s.

Perhaps surprisingly, he was a cautious advocate of the 'Lib-Lab' pact concluded between Prime Minister James Callaghan and Liberal Party leader David Steel in March 1977, a step which he grudgingly tolerated as a necessary evil. He even played an active role on the Liberal-Government Consultative Committee which, he felt, gave his party a much needed opportunity to destroy the 'wilderness complex' disadvantage. Many within the ranks of the Liberal Party (including a substantial innately 'conservative' element within Montgomeryshire) were highly critical of their leaders' apparent readiness to keep in office a Labour government so clearly on the brink of ejection, and Hooson himself tended to favour bringing the highly contentious 'Lib-Lab' pact to an end in the autumn of 1978. Nor did Emlyn Hooson reap any personal benefit from his warm advocacy of a Welsh Assembly during 1978-79. Powys recorded the highest 'No' vote of all the Welsh counties in the Referendum of 1 March 1979, and in the general election which ensued in May, when the Liberal vote slumped badly, the seemingly impregnable 'man for Montgomeryshire' unexpectedly lost his seat to the Conservative

candidate Delwyn Williams by a margin of 1593 votes. A ninety-nine year Liberal tenure of the seat thus dramatically came to an end - to the intense chagrin of the party in Wales.

Shortly afterwards he entered the House of Lords as life peer Baron Hooson of Montgomery and Colomendy in Denbighshire, at once becoming prominent in the affairs of the Upper House, where he was to prove active in improving the Mental Health Act, urged police reforms and spoke on law reform and drug trafficking.

Emlyn Hooson remained a prominent Liberal Democrat and public figure in Welsh life until his death. He was for many years his party's spokesman in the Lords on Welsh affairs, legal affairs, agriculture and European affairs. He served as president of the Welsh Liberal Party from 1983 until 1986. When the Liberals merged with the SDP in 1988, he backed Alan Beith for the leadership against the less cautious figure of Paddy Ashdown.

Among his numerous business interests were his chairmanship of the Trustees of the Laura Ashley Foundation, 1986-97, and his assiduous membership from 1991 of the Severn River Crossing Plc. He continued to farm at Pen-rhiw farm, Llanidloes, and lived at Summerfield Park, Llanidloes. He had made a concerted effort to save Gwasg Gee in the mid-1950s, was constantly loyal to the Llangollen International Eisteddfod, and supported a multitude of societies in Montgomeryshire and beyond. Having suffered increasing ill-health during recent years, Emlyn Hooson died on 21 February 2012. On the day of his funeral, hundreds of mourners lined the streets of Llanidloes to pay their respects to a man described as 'a great servant to the people of Montgomeryshire'. He was a cousin (and political opponent) of **Tom Hooson**, the Conservative MP for the Brecon and Radnor division who died in 1985. A large archive of his papers is in the custody of the National Library of Wales.

Author

Dr John Graham Jones

Sources

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Further Reading

NLW Archives: [Introducing Emlyn Hooson](#)

NLW Archives: [Emlyn Hooson, Liberal. Polling Day Thursday, October 10th, 1974](#)

NLW Archives: [Welsh Devolution Referendum, 1979](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Emlyn Hooson, Baron Hooson](#)

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