

HUGHES, CLEDWYN, BARON CLEDWYN OF PENRHOS (1916-2001), politician

Name: Cledwyn Hughes
Date of birth: 1916
Date of death: 2001
Spouse: Jean Beatrice Hughes (née Hughes)
Parent: Emma Hughes (née Hughes)
Parent: Henry David Hughes
Gender: Male
Occupation: politician
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: David Lewis Jones

Cledwyn Hughes was born on 14 September 1916 at 13 Plashyfyrd Terrace, Holyhead, the elder son of Henry David Hughes and Emma Davies, née Hughes, who was a young widow with a little son, Emlyn, when she re-married in 1915. Through his father, Cledwyn Hughes was descended from several generations of slate quarrymen in Caernarfonshire. Henry Hughes, widely known as Harri Hughes, left school at the age of twelve to work in the Dinorwig quarry; after nine years, he resumed his education and entered the Calvinistic Methodist ministry, serving as the minister at Disgwylfa Chapel in Holyhead from 1915 until his death in 1947. As a child, Cledwyn and his younger brother, David Lloyd, attended chapel daily. Cledwyn Hughes was educated at Holyhead Grammar School and at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, where he graduated in 1937 with a degree in law.

Harri Hughes was a fervent supporter of [David Lloyd George](#) and of his daughter, [Megan Lloyd George](#), the Liberal member for Anglesey from 1929. At university, Cledwyn Hughes followed his family's Liberal tradition and he was elected chairman of the Liberal Society. On leaving Aberystwyth, Hughes returned to Holyhead where he worked to obtain qualifications as a solicitor. Meanwhile, he reflected on contemporary conditions and read radical critiques of society with the result that he moved towards the Labour Party.

After he qualified as a solicitor in 1940, Hughes entered the Royal Air Force Voluntary Reserve where he served in an administrative role, achieving the rank of Flight Lieutenant. While in the air force, he was selected to be the Labour candidate for Anglesey at the 1945 general election. This was a difficult decision, in view of his family's loyalty to the Liberal party, but he was justified when, in a two-way contest, [Lady Megan's](#) majority fell to 1081 votes. Following demobilisation in 1946, Hughes returned to practice as a solicitor in Holyhead and he became the youngest member on Anglesey County Council when he stood for the Kingsland Ward in Holyhead. He was also appointed the acting clerk to Holyhead District Council and held this post until 1949.

In a three-way contest at the 1950 general election, [Lady Megan](#) held the Anglesey seat, with a slightly increased majority; Hughes came second. A year later, Hughes won the seat for the Labour Party with a majority of 595 votes. In his maiden speech on 8 November 1951, Hughes spoke on the deficiencies of housing in Anglesey; on the ill-advised creation of a Minister of State for Welsh Affairs attached to the post of Home Secretary; and on his concerns for the future of the Welsh language, which he felt required a measure of Welsh devolution. Hughes remained a county councillor until 1953 and he maintained good relations with the County Council throughout his time as a Member of Parliament and he worked hard over the years, with some success, to bring employment to Anglesey.

During the years 1951 to 1956, Hughes was a leading supporter of the Parliament for Wales campaign, which led members of the Labour Party, unhappy with the idea of devolution, to report Hughes and four other members to the National Executive Committee of the party. Following the failure of this campaign, Hughes backed the fight to obtain a Secretary of State for Wales and he was pleased when this became part of Labour's official policy by the 1959 general election. In 1958, Hugh Gaitskell, Leader of the Opposition, and [James Callaghan](#), shadow minister for the colonies, recommended that Hughes should undertake a survey of conditions in the remote island colony of St. Helena. Accompanied by his wife and young son, Hughes spent five weeks on the island and produced a report critical of the lack of democratic institutions and highlighting the need for increased financial aid for the inhabitants. While the Conservative government did not introduce any measures to improve conditions in St. Helena until 1963, Hughes received useful press coverage for his work and Gaitskell appointed him in 1959 to the post of opposition spokesman for housing and local government, which he held until 1964.

After the Labour Party's narrow victory on 15 October 1964, Arthur Bottomley became Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations with Hughes as his Minister of State. Hughes represented the government at the independence ceremonies in Kenya, Gambia and Malta. His negotiating skills were tested by the conflicts between members of the Commonwealth, especially in Cyprus, Malaysia and the Indian sub-continent where Hughes negotiated a cease-fire between India and Pakistan following a military conflict in the Rann of Kutch during June 1965. When the Maltese Prime Minister was agitated over the future of British dockyards on the island, Hughes was sent to reassure him. A greater test arose when Hughes was despatched to Southern Rhodesia for talks in July 1965 with Ian Smith, the Prime Minister of the colony, and other leading politicians, except those in prison. These talks did not produce a solution.

After the Labour Party won the 1966 general election with an increased majority, [James Griffiths](#), the first Secretary of State for Wales, decided to retire and Wilson replaced him with Hughes whose success at the Commonwealth Relations Office had earned him a place in the Cabinet. Following the election in 1964, Hughes had hoped for a post in the Welsh Office and he was delighted to succeed [Griffiths](#). He held the post of Secretary of State for Wales for two years, from 6 April 1966 to 6 April 1968; his first Minister of State was [George Thomas](#), who was followed in 1967 by [Eirene White](#) who spoke warmly of Hughes's support and encouragement in that he allowed her to carry out her responsibilities without needless interference.

Hughes's first months at the Welsh Office were difficult despite the fact that the Labour Party held 32 of the 36 Welsh constituencies. The Welsh Language Society

organised an active campaign over road tax licences; the Welsh economy was not performing well; there were loud public disputes over a new town proposed at Caerws and over reservoirs. On 21 October 1966, a great catastrophe occurred at Aberfan when waste from a coal-tip flowed down over the village school and left 116 children and 28 adults dead. Immediately, the Prime Minister and Hughes flew to Aberfan where Wilson announced that he was giving Hughes military-type powers to deal with the situation. Following the disaster, Hughes took swift and decisive action: **Judge Edmund Davies** was appointed to head a public enquiry and a Derelict Lands Unit was established within the Welsh Office to prevent similar disasters. To the end of his life, Hughes described the Aberfan disaster as the darkest days of his life and the memories remained painful.

At the 1966 general election the Labour Party issued a separate Welsh manifesto that included a commitment for further measures of devolution. However, the Labour Party, particularly in south Wales, was alarmed when Plaid Cymru won the Carmarthen by-election and made a strong showing in the Rhondda West constituency, both in 1966; Hughes had to trim his ambitions for further devolution. His attempt to reorganise local government was opposed by Richard Crossman who insisted on completing reform of English local government first and his proposals for an elected council for Wales failed to be endorsed by the Cabinet because of determined opposition from Willie Ross, the Scottish Secretary. Hughes also faced hostility within the Labour Party when he introduced the Welsh Language Bill in 1967; he would have preferred to prepare a detailed bill but was forced to compromise on a short enabling bill, which did not satisfy campaigners on behalf of the language. Another controversial matter within Wales was the investiture of the Prince of Wales; Hughes was not disconcerted by the protestors and he established a good personal relationship with the Prince.

In the government reshuffle of April 1968, Wilson moved Hughes to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; Wilson may have felt that Hughes was too committed to devolution because he appointed **George Thomas**, an opponent of devolution, to succeed Hughes. At the Ministry of Agriculture, Hughes had to deal with the closing stages of a severe outbreak of foot and mouth; he ensured that the recommendations of a committee of enquiry, chaired by the Duke of Northumberland, were implemented promptly and this action prevented another major occurrence of the disease for many years. He was responsible for introducing codes of welfare, a stormy matter, for livestock in 1969 and set up the Waterhouse Committee on rabies, which eventually led to measures controlling this disease. The most difficult task he faced was negotiating the Price Review with farmers, who were notorious for their ingratitude, but Hughes achieved considerable success with his 1970 Price Review. While at the Welsh Office, Hughes had sought to increase the department's powers over agriculture and health; as Minister of Agriculture, he transferred powers over agriculture in Wales to the Welsh Office.

After the Labour Party lost the 1970 general election, Hughes was appointed the opposition spokesman for agriculture but he was dismissed in January 1972 after he disobeyed Wilson's instruction that the Labour Members should abstain in the vote on the terms for entry to the Common Market. Hughes was a moderate supporter of Britain's entry; a vice-president of the all-party group, Britain in Europe, he campaigned for a yes vote during the 1975 referendum on entry. When the Labour Party returned to government in February 1974, Hughes was not appointed to a government post then or after the October 1974 election. The growing influence of the left within the Labour Party led to the election of Ian Mikardo as chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party, with Hughes as the deputy chairman. After the October 1974 election, Hughes stood as the candidate of moderate Labour Members and defeated Mikardo. When Wilson decided to stand down as Prime Minister, Hughes had the task of organising the election of a leader of the Labour Party who would also succeed Wilson as Prime Minister. Two of the candidates, James Callaghan and **Roy Jenkins** were close to Hughes but he carried out this difficult task with considerable tact and he was pleased when Callaghan succeeded Wilson in April 1976. Callaghan and Hughes had first met in 1949 at the home of Glenys Kinnoek's parents in Holyhead; her father was to become chairman of the Labour Party in Anglesey.

Hughes remained chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party during Callaghan's premiership; he assisted the Prime Minister by keeping an eye on the quarrelsome factions within the party and by carrying out a number of delicate tasks. In March 1977, Hughes took part in the negotiations that led to the Lib-Lab Pact. When the Callaghan government did not have a majority in the House of Commons during autumn 1978, Hughes persuaded the Plaid Cymru members to support the government in return for a promise to introduce legislation providing compensation for workers suffering from silicosis as a result of working in the slate quarries. In November 1978, Hughes returned to Southern Rhodesia as Callaghan's envoy to the Smith government; he did not succeed in persuading Smith to open discussions with the British government but his mission resumed contacts that led to more successful discussions a year later. Hughes led a parliamentary delegation to the Soviet Union in 1977 and Callaghan commented that he was a good choice because it was unlikely that Soviet spies could speak Welsh. The Callaghan government ended in disappointment for Hughes when proposals for greater devolution were turned down in Wales at the referendum held on 1 March 1979. After the government fell at the end of March, Hughes left the House of Commons; the strength of his personal following in Anglesey was shown when the constituency returned a Conservative member.

In Callaghan's dissolution honours list published on 15 June 1979, Hughes became a life peer and took the title of Baron Cledwyn of Penrhos, of Holyhead in the Isle of Anglesey. When the Social Democratic Party was formed in 1981, Lord Cledwyn declined an invitation to join the new party. After the death of **Lord Goronwy-Roberts** in July 1981, Lord Cledwyn was elected deputy leader of the Labour Party in the Lords; dissatisfaction with the leadership of Lord Peart persuaded leading Labour peers to nominate him as leader in November 1982. After winning this election, he became an influential figure in the House of Lords until he stood down in 1992; he organised an effective opposition to the controversial measures of the Thatcher government and, on occasion, managed to defeat the government. The debates of the House of Lords were televised and this gave great public prominence to the Labour opposition in the Lords. Lord Cledwyn was highly skilled in organising the resources at his disposal efficiently in his task of keeping the government under scrutiny. For most of his time as leader of the opposition in the Lords and, as such, a member of the Shadow Cabinet, Neil Kinnoek was leader of the Labour Party and there was a strong working relationship between the two men. If Labour had won the 1992 general election, Kinnoek intended to appoint Lord Cledwyn to a Cabinet post.

Since 1976, Lord Cledwyn had been President of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth; he relinquished this post when he was appointed Pro-Chancellor of the University of Wales in 1985. The various problems, particularly financial, of the University and its colleges took up a considerable amount of Lord Cledwyn's time during the next decade. He was successful in obtaining the necessary funds from the Conservative government to allow the amalgamation of the University College at Cardiff and the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology. After he resigned from his post as Pro-Chancellor in 1993, Lord Cledwyn accepted an invitation to become President of the University College of North Wales at Bangor in 1995. After 1979, his greatest service to Wales came in 1982 when he played a leading part in persuading William Whitelaw to change government policy and to allow a Welsh language television service.

Following his resignation as leader of the Labour Party in the House of Lords, Lord Cledwyn attended the House regularly and spoke, in the main, on Welsh subjects. He served on the Political Honours Scrutiny Committee from 1992 until he was replaced in 1998. He was pleased that the new Labour government in 1997 was successful in introducing a devolved assembly in Wales although this was tempered by some disappointment in that he was not asked to play a part in the process. Prompted by John Grigg, the biographer of **David Lloyd George**, Lord Cledwyn established the David Lloyd George Statue Appeal Trust in 1996; the Trust's aim was to raise an outdoor statue of **Lloyd George** in London. Guided by Lord Cledwyn, the trustees insisted that the statue should be placed in Parliament Square; he did not live to see the completion of this task but his part was remembered with great affection when the Prince of Wales unveiled the statue in 2007.

Lord Cledwyn was appointed a Companion of Honour in 1977; he was a freeman of Beaumaris (1972), of the Borough of Anglesey (1976), and of Cardiff (2000); he held honorary degrees from the University of Wales (1970), Sheffield (1992) and Glamorgan (1996). His political record shows that Lord Cledwyn was a gifted politician and an efficient administrator; he was also a person of great warmth and humour, with a considerable talent for story telling. Above all things, he was devoted to Wales. It is not surprising that, throughout the political world and in Wales, he was known simply as Cledwyn. He stands with **Lloyd George** and **Aneurin Bevan** as the leading Welsh politicians of the twentieth century.

He was a short man, stockily built, with dark hair and a prominent birthmark on his face; Cledwyn Hughes married Jean Beatrice Hughes, also from Holyhead, on 17 June 1949 and they had a son and a daughter; their home was at Muriaw, Holyhead, and later at Penmorfa, Treaddur Bay near Holyhead. Lord Cledwyn died at Ysbyty Glan Clwyd, Bodwyddelan, on 22 February 2001; a public funeral service was held at Disgwylfa Chapel followed by a private burial at Maeshyfyrd Cemetery, also in Holyhead, on 27 February.

Author

David Lewis Jones

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Further Reading

D. Ben Rees, *Cofiant Cledwyn Hughes: un o wŷr mawr MĀ'n a Chymru* (Talybont 2017)

NLW Archives: [Vote for Cledwyn Hughes](#)

NLW Archives: [General Election 28 February 1974. Vote Hughes](#)

NLW Archives: [Cledwyn Hughes, An Anglesey man for Anglesey](#)

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

Wikipedia Article: [Cledwyn Hughes, Baron Cledwyn of Penrhos](#)

Images

Portrait at Aberystwyth University

bust at the National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff

Sound and Film

D. Ben Rees: [Yr Arglwydd Cledwyn o Benrhos \(1916-2001\)](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Lord Cledwyn of Penrhos Papers](#)

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