

= S. O. Davies =

Stephen Owen Davies (birth date uncertain , died 25 February 1972) , generally known as S. O. Davies , was a Welsh miner , trade union official and Labour Party politician , who served as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Merthyr Tydfil from 1934 to 1972 . In 1970 , when well past 80 , he was deselected as parliamentary candidate by his local party association on account of his age . He fought the constituency in the 1970 general election as an Independent and won comfortably , a rare example in British politics of an independent candidate defeating a major party 's organisation .

Most official records show Davies 's birth date as November 1886 , but he is widely thought to have been born at least four years earlier . After leaving school aged 12 and working for some years in local pits , Davies studied mining engineering and later took an Arts degree at University College , Cardiff . He returned to the coalfields in 1913 , and established a reputation for militancy . In 1918 he was elected miners ' agent for the Dowlais district of the South Wales Miners ' Federation (SWMF) , and in 1924 was appointed SWMF 's chief organiser , legal adviser , and vice @-@ president . After a visit to Moscow in 1922 he became a firm defender of the Soviet Union , a position he maintained for the rest of his life .

After his election to parliament in 1934 , Davies was a consistent advocate for the interests of Merthyr Tydfil and the Welsh mining community . Largely indifferent to party discipline and official policy , among wider causes he championed were disarmament and Welsh nationalism , with a persistence that brought him several suspensions from the party and helped to ensure that he was never offered ministerial office . An immensely popular figure locally , he was regularly returned at general elections with large majorities . In 1966 , after an unstable colliery spoil tip collapsed on the village of Aberfan with the loss of 144 lives , Davies controversially stated that he had long thought that the tip was unsafe . He had not reported his suspicions , for fear that an enquiry would cause the closures of local pits . Not long after his unexpected 1970 electoral triumph , Davies died early in 1972 aged at least 85 and possibly 90 or more .

= = Early life = =

= = = Birth , childhood and early career = = =

There is uncertainty about Davies 's date of birth . Most records say November 1886 , though usually with the caveat that he might have been born several years earlier . His birthplace was 39 John Street , Abercwmboi (then known as Cap Coch) in the South Wales coalfields , the fourth child of Thomas Davies and his wife Esther . Thomas was a miner and trade union activist , who under the pseudonym Y Llwynog (" the Fox ") wrote a column for the Welsh language newspaper Tarian y Gweithiwr (" The Worker 's Shield ") , in which he berated pit management and safety practices . His general militancy led to his blacklisting by pit owners , and after spells of unemployment he eventually found work as an insurance agent .

Davies attended the local Cap Coch school , leaving at the age of 12 , as was usual at that time , to begin work in the Cwmpennar coal mine . He remained there until the mine was exhausted in 1905 , when he moved to Mountain Ash to work at Nixon 's Navigation Colliery . His ambition and intelligence were quickly recognised by his superiors , and he was encouraged to study mining engineering , at first locally in Aberdare and , in 1907 , at the Royal College of Science in London . In 1908 , with sponsorship from the Brecon Memorial College , he passed his matriculation and began studying for a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree at University College , Cardiff , with a view thereafter to entering the nonconformist ministry . However , Davies 's religious beliefs were influenced by R.J. Campbell , a noted preacher who rejected much traditional Christian teaching and asserted that socialism was the practical expression of Christianity . Davies 's association with such supposed heresies was unacceptable to the Brecon college , which withdrew its financial support .

Despite this loss of sponsorship , Davies completed his studies and graduated in 1913 . His plans to enter the ministry were abandoned ; he was an active member of the Independent Labour Party (

ILP) , and his religious vocation had been replaced by a commitment to working @-@ class politics . In 1913 , while still a student , he stood for election to Cardiff 's Board of Guardians , as the ILP candidate in the Grangetown ward . This first foray into electoral politics ended in a narrow defeat , by 47 votes .

= = = Mineworker and union official = = =

After graduation , Davies returned to work in the mines , initially at Tumble in the Gwendraeth Valley . In December 1913 he unsuccessfully sought election as miners ' sub @-@ agent for the Anthracite Miners ' district of the SWMF . When the First World War began in August 1914 he opposed it as capitalist militarism : " History teaches that war invariably brings in its wake a lower standard of morality , a restriction of the liberty of the masses , and a degradation of their social conditions " . In 1917 Davies founded and was first chairman of the Burry Port and Gwendraeth Valley Trades and Labour Council . He was initially selected as the Labour candidate for the Llanelli constituency in the 1918 general election , but stood down when the SWMF backed his rival , J.H. Williams .

In 1918 Davies sought the position of miners ' agent for the Dowlais district of the SWMF . Against strong competition ? his main opponent was William Mainwaring , later a long @-@ serving Labour MP for Rhondda East ? Davies was victorious by 100 votes . The main role of the agent was to represent miners in disputes with their employers ; typically these would involve issues of pay , redundancy , working hours , and compensation for injuries . Davies 's surviving day books reveal the extent to which he was concerned with cases where the mining companies denied liability for underground injuries .

In 1919 Davies married Margaret (" Madge ") Eley from Cardiff ; three daughters were subsequently born . The years following the First World War saw economic decline and hardship in the South Wales coalfields , conditions which deepened Davies 's radical instincts , and he began to acquire a reputation for militancy . Contrary to mainstream Labour Party policy , Davies advocated workers ' control rather than the nationalisation of the mining industry . In 1921 he unsuccessfully advocated affiliation of the Miners ' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB , precursor of the National Union of Mineworkers or NUM) with the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) . The following year he was a delegate from the SWMF to the Second World Congress of the RILU in Moscow , and acquired a warm sympathy towards the Soviet system . He did not , however , join the recently formed Communist Party of Great Britain , and remained within the Labour Party .

In 1924 Davies was appointed SWMF 's chief organiser and legal adviser , and was elected its vice @-@ president . He also served as the South Wales representative on the executive committee of the MFGB from 1924 to 1934 . During the May 1926 general strike , the South Wales miners were among the most fervent in support of the action . When the national strike collapsed after nine days , Davies led the continued resistance from the Welsh coalfields through months of lockout , before capitulation on harsh terms in December . Dowlais was the last district to return to work . The period following 1926 was marked by much in @-@ fighting between communist and non @-@ communist factions in the coalfields . Davies and other non @-@ communists found themselves accused of collaboration with " social fascism " ; a leaflet issued by the communist @-@ led National Minority Movement termed him " the sham militant " . Nevertheless , he continued to work for cooperation between all factions on the left . After Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 , Davies argued for unity around the Labour Party , believing that the ILP 's increasingly left @-@ wing stance , and the Communist Party 's commitment to violent revolution , might create the conditions for fascism . In 1931 Davies was elected to Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council .

= = Member of Parliament = =

= = = By @-@ election June 1934 = = =

When Richard Wallhead , the Labour MP for Merthyr , died on 27 April 1934 , Davies was selected as the party 's candidate for the June by @-@ election , with the support of the MFGB . Wallhead had held the seat since 1922 , with large majorities ; in the 1931 general election he had defeated a single opponent , a candidate from Oswald Mosley 's New Party who had received tacit support from the Conservative Party . Davies faced opposition from the Liberal Party , the Communist Party and the ILP . With no candidate from the ruling National Government in the field , Davies was denied an obvious target for attack ; as the Manchester Guardian stated in its pre @-@ poll analysis , he was put on the defensive : " His is the dispiriting task of trying to lose as few votes as possible " . The paper predicted a close result .

Using the slogan " Peace , Prosperity , Security , Freedom " , Davies advocated the extension of public ownership , abolition of the means test , increased unemployment benefit , better education , and international co @-@ operation especially with Russia . He dismissed the ILP as having no function beyond the splitting of the Labour vote . With strong support from the local trade unions and helped by a well @-@ organised campaign , Davies swept to an easy victory on 5 June . His 18 @,@ 645 votes gave him a majority of 8 @,@ 269 over his Liberal opponent , with his ILP and Communist challengers lagging far behind .

= = = In the House of Commons = = =

= = = Member for Merthyr = = =

Davies gave his maiden speech in the House of Commons on 21 June 1934 . Breaking with the tradition that such speeches should be non @-@ partisan , he delivered a fierce attack on the government 's policy towards the mining industry . He had come , he said , from a coalfield that " has had very little help from the present government ... we see communities with a great industrial history dissolving and disintegrating " . An uncompromising approach on any questions affecting Merthyr Tydfil , or the mining industry generally , became Davies 's parliamentary hallmark . In December 1934 he rebuked the veteran Conservative MP Nancy Astor when she referred to Merthyr as having " no social consciousness or initiative to do anything " . Davies replied : " I object to irresponsible and brutal charges coming from people whose knowledge is derived from the enjoyment of vast wealth , especially when I am not certain that they have made their contribution towards producing that wealth " .

In 1934 , two years after his wife Margaret 's death from cancer , Davies married Sephora Davies , a schoolteacher from Gwaun @-@ Cae @-@ Gurwen in Carmarthenshire who shared Davies 's political outlook . The couple lived at Gwynfryn Park Terrace in Merthyr Tydfil , and had two sons . In November 1936 , having been returned in the 1935 general election with an increased majority , Davies ridiculed the prime minister , Stanley Baldwin , for his refusal to meet a delegation from the National Unemployed Workers ' Movement 's 1936 Hunger March , which included a large contingent from South Wales : " A bigger man would meet these people who have tramped the roads of this country and would show that he had sympathy with them " . In 1938 , having modified his earlier position , Davies supported a bill introduced by the Labour opposition for the nationalisation of the coal industry . Miners worked , he said , in intolerable conditions to ensure that cheap raw material was available to industry . Reasonable wages and working conditions would never be granted by private coal @-@ owners . The bill was defeated .

As Europe moved towards war in the late 1930s , Davies opposed the appeasement policies of the Chamberlain government . He doubted the will of the British ruling classes to wage a determined war against fascism , and called for a workers ' " Popular Front " of resistance to the dictators . After the outbreak of war in September 1939 Davies demanded from the British government " a more specific and detailed statement " of war aims , to allay " suspicions ... as to the real and possibly as yet unstated war aims of this country and of France " . He criticised Labour 's decision in May 1940 to join Churchill 's wartime coalition government , and thereafter opposed many of the coalition 's domestic policies , such as indiscriminate internment of aliens , restrictions on industrial action , and

the suppression of the communist newspaper the Daily Worker . The bitterness of Davies 's personal attack on Herbert Morrison , the Home Secretary who had authorised the paper 's closure , shocked even the British Communist Party 's general secretary , Harry Pollitt , who cautioned Davies that " personal abuse has been our stock @-@ in @-@ trade for twenty years and has got us nowhere " .

Unlike the British communists , Davies did not change his position when the Soviet Union entered the war in June 1941 . He continued to oppose all co @-@ operation with the Conservatives , believing that only through socialism could a just and lasting peace be achieved . Victory in 1945 , and the subsequent election of a Labour government , did little to affect Davies 's individualism . In the Labour years 1945 ? 51 he opposed government policies on conscription , NATO , the development of nuclear weapons , and intervention in the Korean War . According to his biographer Robert Griffiths , it was hatred of capitalist militarism , rather than a wish to support the Soviet Union , that underlay Davies 's stances . His popularity in South Wales was unaffected : he was returned to parliament in each postwar election with large majorities . In 1945 ? 46 he served as Merthyr Tydfil 's mayor , remaining on the local council until 1949 .

= = = Labour rebel = = =

In assessing Davies 's political career the historian Alun Morgan notes certain inconsistencies : while calling for unity among leftist factions , Davies frequently rebelled against agreed Labour Party policies . He championed democracy , individual liberty and the rights of small nations , yet gave the Soviet Union his unvarying and uncritical support . However , he was consistent in certain core areas , often in defiance of official Labour policy : unremitting hostility to US foreign policy , opposition to UK defence expenditure , and above all commitment to the needs and interests of his Merthyr constituents . His dedication to his own agenda brought him into frequent conflict with party managers , and led to withdrawals of the party whip throughout the 1950s and 1960s . Stating his position in a 1948 letter to the Labour Party general secretary Morgan Phillips , he wrote : " Our movement embraces millions of men and women , and not merely a few hundred MPs and a few dozen ... members of the National Executive . I am habitually inclined to give our millions my first thoughts and consideration . " Davies 's popularity with the voters of Merthyr Tydfil remained constant ; he secured 75 per cent or more of the vote in each of the general elections of 1955 , 1959 , 1964 and 1966 .

In December 1951 Sephora Davies was expelled from the Labour Party because of her close association with a proscribed organisation , the British Soviet Friendship Society . Davies 's deep roots in the Labour movement , and his large base of local support , saved him from a similar fate . In June 1953 he was attacked by Will Lawther , the NUM president , for defying the Labour Party 's position and supporting the Soviet claim that a workers ' rising in East Germany had been orchestrated by " a CIA @-@ sponsored West @-@ German pro @-@ fascist organisation " . Lawther demanded that the local Merthyr Tydfil party deselect Davies as their parliamentary candidate , but they stood firm .

Davies found himself again at odds with his party , over the issue of Welsh self @-@ government . He had championed this cause for many years , to the annoyance of Labour 's Welsh Regional Council . In May 1954 he offered proposals for a Welsh parliament that were rejected by the Regional Council and by the South Wales Area conference of the NUM . Davies persevered , and on 4 March 1955 introduced in the House of Commons a private member 's bill proposing self @-@ government for Wales on the basis of the aborted 1914 act that would have granted home rule to Ireland . Davies claimed to have received thousands of messages of support for his measure , from all parts of Wales , but in the House he could only muster 14 votes in favour . Undeterred , he told MPs : " There is a movement in Wales , an uprising , as it were , that will not only support the bill but will continue to insist upon it until Wales is represented in the United Kingdom as something more than a mere region . "

According to Griffiths , when Soviet troops suppressed the Hungarian uprising in October 1956 , Davies was troubled , but refused to join in the general censure lest this give comfort to the enemies

of socialism . He was to be equally silent during and after the events of the Prague Spring of 1968 ? in sharp contrast to his condemnation of the " criminally dangerous and irresponsible heroics " of the United States during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 . In 1961 , at the request of the Labour Party leadership , Davies was one of 25 Labour MPs and party members investigated by the British security services as a possible Communist Party member . The MI5 report stated that there was evidence to indicate that Davies , " if not of the Party ... is at least very close to it indeed " .

= = Aberfan = =

Davies 's Merthyr constituency included the mining village of Aberfan , situated a few miles south of Merthyr Tydfil . On the mountainsides above the village , colliery waste had been dumped over the years to form large spoil tips . Shortly after 9 : 00 am on Friday 21 October 1966 one of these tips collapsed , sending thousands of tons of semi @-@ liquid waste hurtling towards Aberfan . The point of impact was Pantglas Junior School , where morning lessons were beginning . The school was half submerged ; inside , 109 children and 5 teachers were killed . A further 7 children and 23 adults lost their lives outside the school , in the streets or adjoining houses . In the immediate aftermath , Davies visited and consoled the bereaved families in Aberfan , and on the Saturday he led a party which included the Duke of Edinburgh on a tour of the disaster site .

On 24 October , the National Coal Board chairman Lord Robens stated that the cause of the landslide was a previously unknown spring , which had been pouring water into the centre of the tip , creating a " water bomb " . Local miners disagreed ; they said that the spring 's existence had been known when tipping began 20 years earlier . A tribunal was set up under Lord Justice Edmund Davies , to investigate the disaster .

Giving evidence to the tribunal , S. O. Davies said he had long suspected that the Aberfan tips were unstable , but had kept quiet for fear that if tipping was stopped on the mountainside the Coal Board would close the colliery . Davies added : " But if I had been asked to do so , I would have done it " . His testimony was strongly challenged by the NUM , whose counsel Brian Gibbens QC said that " [i] f Mr Davies is to be accepted as truthful and accurate in his recollection ... then he bears what must be one of the largest personal burdens of responsibility for the disaster " . However , Gibbens found it incredible that a man in Davies 's unique local position of authority and influence would not have mentioned his fears to any of the formal bodies ? borough council , Coal Board , union or local Labour Party : " If anyone could have exercised influence to overcome an obdurate or ignorant monolith like the Coal Board , [Davies] was well placed to do so . " Gibbens submitted that Davies 's testimony should be rejected , on the grounds that he " never appreciated what in fact was the import of his words " . The tribunal concurred , accepting that Davies had not fully understood the gravity of his admission , and adding that had they been convinced otherwise , he could not have escaped censure . The tribunal 's findings , published in July 1967 , placed responsibility for the disaster firmly on the National Coal Board , specifically on the absence of any tipping policy .

= = Later career = =

= = = Rift with Labour = = =

In December 1966 Davies introduced a bill to the House of Commons , to provide more generous compensation to miners suffering from dust @-@ related diseases . The bill was accepted by Harold Wilson 's Labour government , and became law in 1967 . This was one of the few instances during this period in which Davies and the Labour government worked together . Following the Coal Board 's refusal to meet the full cost of removing the remaining Aberfan tips , Wilson proposed that part of the required £ 750 @, @ 000 be met by the disaster fund set up to help the people of Aberfan rebuild their community . Davies was outraged ; he told Wilson : " I have never known a prime minister to behave so disgracefully in all my 34 years in the House of Commons " . Subsequently , Davies opposed the 1969 decision of Merthyr Tydfil Council to award Wilson the freedom of the borough ,

stating that he would boycott the ceremony .

While many constituents supported Davies in his frequent attacks on government policies , the local Labour Party became increasingly concerned by his activities . By the late 1960s many of them were from a younger generation , with no experience of the shared hardships of the 1920s and 1930s , and with a less parochial mindset . They were angered by what they perceived as Davies 's disloyalty to the Wilson government , elected in 1964 after thirteen years of opposition , and his penchant for following his own agenda . There was also the question of his age ; in 1970 he was supposedly 83 , but rumours that he was older were widespread . By March 1970 the local party discussed replacing Davies as their candidate at the next general election , citing his age rather than policy disagreements . The National Executive of the party sanctioned this action , and at a special meeting on 10 May , which Davies declined to attend , he was formally deselected .

= = = 1970 election = = =

Davies reacted to his deselection by announcing that the people of Merthyr , not the local Labour Party , would decide his future . If physically fit he would contest the next election as an Independent Socialist . Friends advised him not to risk humiliation ; no deselected candidate in recent times had won election against the party machine , and Davies would , they predicted , get no more than 1 @, @ 000 votes . Within a few days of the deselection meeting Wilson called a snap general election , which gave the Merthyr party little time to find their new candidate . They chose Tal Lloyd , an Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) official , a long @-@ serving councillor and a former mayor , on the moderate wing of the Labour Party , and a strong supporter of Wilson .

With no party organisation and only his own financial resources , Davies 's campaign was initially very low @-@ key . His election literature was a single sheet with the message " You Know Me , I 've Never Let You Down " . As polling day approached , however , it was clear that he was gathering support , particularly among the young ? a great irony , Alun Morgan observes , for a man sacked on the grounds of his age . In the final week before polling day on 18 June Davies 's youthful supporters toured the constituency with songs , slogans and cheerleaders in what Griffiths describes as " the most colourful election bandwagon seen in Merthyr for 40 years " . The official Labour campaign stalled , as Lloyd became embroiled in a row over his role in the failure of the AEU to support an unofficial strike at the local Hoover factory . On polling day , amid scenes of jubilation . Davies was returned with a majority of 7 @, @ 467 over Lloyd . Davies responded to his victory by thanking the voters whom , he said , he had never thought for a moment would let him down . Two weeks later Davies and his principal campaign workers were expelled from the Labour Party for opposing its official candidate . The national leadership refused his request for an official enquiry into the actions of the Merthyr party , in the selection process and during the election itself .

= = = Final years and death = = =

Despite his expulsion , in July 1970 the Labour @-@ controlled Merthyr council offered Davies the freedom of the borough , an honour which he politely declined ; the confidence of the people recently shown him was , he said , enough . He resumed his place in parliament , on the opposition benches as Labour had unexpectedly lost the election to Edward Heath 's Conservatives . Despite some ill @-@ feeling , Davies was not ostracised by his erstwhile colleagues , and was unofficially briefed by the party . He limited his Commons appearances and rarely spoke in debates , generally preferring to serve his constituents from home . On the major national issue of the 1970 ? 74 parliament ? Heath 's renewed bid for Britain 's membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) ? Davies voiced uncompromising opposition . In a letter to the South Wales Echo on 9 August 1971 he challenged the government 's claim that " our security has been bound up with our European neighbours for over a thousand years " , pointing out Britain 's involment in numerous European wars , " including the Hitler war when British security meant co @-@ operation with Russia " .

On 22 February 1972 Davies attended parliament to vote against the government on an EEC @-@

related motion . He returned to Merthyr suffering from a chest infection , took to his bed on 24th , and on 25th was transferred to Merthyr General Hospital where he died later that day . His funeral was held at Soar @-@ Ynysgau chapel , Merthyr on 29 February , followed by burial at the Maes @-@ Yr @-@ Arian Cemetery at nearby Mountain Ash . Griffiths records : " It was indicative of [Davies 's] breadth of vision that the ceremony attracted socialists , communists , Welsh nationalists , republicans , and many of no political creed at all " . In the April by @-@ election to fill the vacancy caused by Davies 's death the Labour candidate , Ted Rowlands , won the seat with a narrow majority over Plaid Cymru .

= = Tributes = =

According to a BBC correspondent Davies " looked as if he belonged to a different age , in his parliamentary ' uniform ' of Homburg hat , silk scarf , black jacket and pin @-@ striped trousers " . Two close Merthyr friends who had followed him out of the Labour Party described him as " [a] tall man who walked tall and never bowed to anyone , but treated everyone alike . " His obituarist in The Times referred to his deceptively mild outward demeanour , " but underneath , fires were forever smouldering " .

Many of the tributes paid to Davies after his death acknowledged his commitment to Merthyr and the mining communities of the Welsh valleys , for whom he was an unfailing advocate . The mayor of Merthyr remarked that he was " an individualist who followed the teaching of ' Love thy neighbour as thyself ' . He was highly respected by all , even by those who didn 't agree with him " . His parliamentary colleague and fellow mineworker Jim Griffiths , who had shared with Davies the leadership of the South Wales miners after the 1926 general strike , thought that had Davies cultivated an ability for compromise , he would have achieved ministerial office . But " he always was a lone figure ... and seemed to like being in isolation . " In April 2013 a heritage plaque in Davies 's honour was unveiled at Penydarren Park , Merthyr Tydfil . On 5 August 2015 , as part of the De Montfort Project celebrating the 750th anniversary of Simon de Montfort 's parliament , Davies 's parliamentary work was recognised in special events at Cardiff and Merthyr Tydfil .

The Revd Islwyn Jones , who conducted Davies 's funeral service , said : " He had a great love for man , he believed with the Psalmist that ' The earth is the Lord 's and the fulness thereof ' , and it was these words , sinking deep into his heart , which made him ' take up the cudgels for the common man ' " .

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