

HOWELLS, GERAINT WYN, Baron Geraint (1925-2004), farmer and politician

Name: Geraint Wyn Howells

Date of birth: 1925

Date of death: 2004

Gender: Male

Occupation: farmer and politician

Area of activity: Nature and Agriculture; Politics, Government and Political Movements

Author: David Lewis Jones

Born on 15 April 1925, the son of David John and Mary Blodwen Howells, of Brynglas, Ponterwyd, Cardiganshire. He was educated at Ponterwyd Primary School and Ardwyn Grammar School, before he returned to farm with his father. Howells and his parents used Welsh as their first language and they were closely involved in the cultural life of the village; David John Howells served as secretary of the Ponterwyd Eisteddfod and his son was proud that he also served as the secretary from 1944 to 2001.

Howells proved to be a very successful farmer despite working in the difficult terrain of the Welsh hills. In his youth, he was a champion sheep-shearer. He enlarged considerably the holding inherited from his father and became a substantial figure in the wool industry, serving as member for Wales on the British Wool Marketing Board from 1966 to 1987, and as vice-chairman from 1971 to 1983; he was also the chairman of Wool Producers of Wales Ltd from 1977 to 1987. He was renowned for his large flock of Speckled Faces Sheep. From 1966, he was the managing director of meat wholesaler, Wilkinson and Steiner, in Manchester. As President of the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society, he welcomed the Queen to the Society's annual show at Builth on 22 July 1983.

At a relatively young age, Howells entered politics as an independent councillor on Cardiganshire County Council in 1962. He stood as the Liberal candidate for Brecon and Radnor at the 1970 general election, but came a poor third, after the Labour and Conservative candidates. He was nominated the Liberal candidate for Cardiganshire at the February 1974 election and won a surprising victory over the Labour member, Elystan Morgan. Eight months later, Howells held the seat against a challenge from Morgan. At both elections, his majority was around 2500. In 1979, Howells held the seat by a little over 2000 votes above the Conservative candidate. He made his maiden speech in the House of Commons on 14 March 1974 during that part of the debate on the Queen's speech dealing with agriculture and prices. Howells pointed out to the House that he was the first Member from Cardiganshire for fifty years who did not belong to the legal profession but was proud to be a farmer. The main theme of the speech was his concern for the state of agriculture but he also spoke for the devolution of power from London to Wales; he maintained these two themes throughout his political career.

Jeremy Thorpe, the Liberal leader, appointed Howells to be the party's spokesman on Wales in the House of Commons. When Thorpe resigned two years later, Howells supported David Steel during his successful campaign to be party leader. Steel appointed Howells to the post of Liberal spokesman on agriculture and Wales. He was a strong supporter of the pact between the Liberal Party and the Labour Government under [James Callaghan](#) in 1977-78 because he hoped that the government would pursue a policy of devolution. On being given a lift in the ministerial car, he persuaded John Silkin, Minister of Agriculture, to grant official recognition to the Farmers Union of Wales. When the devolution bills were under consideration in 1977, Howells argued strongly that the Scotland Bill and the Wales Bill should come to the House of Commons about the same time or he would not support the government. In an interview published in the Welsh periodical *Barn*, he said that if the Government and members of all parties turned against devolution, then he would turn to Plaid Cymru or to another party in Wales.

Following the failure of the devolution proposals in 1979, Howells continued to argue for devolution and for measures to support the Welsh language. At the Cardigan Eisteddfod in 1976, Howells had urged local authorities to give Welsh culture its proper place in the education of every child; "we must stand firm to our tradition and our Welshness". When the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs produced a report on the provision for Welsh language programmes on the new fourth television channel, Howells and Geraint Morgan, the Conservative member for Denbighshire, presented a minority report urging that Welsh language programmes should be increased each year until one channel in Wales was broadcasting entirely in Welsh.

The formation of the Social Democratic Party in March 1981 challenged the Liberal Party for the centre of politics. The two parties were brought together in the Alliance, a group formed in September 1981 to pool electoral efforts. A traditional Liberal, Howells was not enthusiastic over the formation of the Alliance. His scepticism was confirmed at the 1983 general election when only five Alliance candidates from the Social Democratic Party were among the twenty-three Alliance Members returned to parliament. Howells did not warm to David Owen, leader of the Social Democratic Party after 1983, and his doubts were confirmed again at the 1987 general election when only twenty-two Alliance candidates entered the House of Commons. Following this election, David Steel called for a merger of the two parties, which was achieved on 3 March 1985. Howells accepted these changes and supported Alan Beith, a Welsh speaker, as the leader of the new party. However, he worked well with Paddy Ashdown, the successful candidate for the leadership. Howells was determined to retain the party's Liberal identity and played a key role in establishing Liberal Democrats as its new name.

Howells had an interest in third world politics and denounced the introduction of milk quotas in 1983 as a blunder, arguing that the surpluses should be used to help starving millions in the third world. He was sceptical about the European Union and fought the European proposals that would have crippled British sheep farmers. A year later, during the debate on the Maastricht Treaty in November 1992, he opposed Ashdown's policy of voting with the government and wrote to all Liberal Democrat Members, urging them to vote with the Labour Party or to abstain.

At the 1987 general election, the Ceredigion constituency was enlarged to include North Pembrokeshire. Howells held the seat with a majority of 4700 votes over the Conservative candidate. Five years later, on 9 April 1992, he lost the seat when Cynog Dafis, the Plaid Cymru candidate, placed fourth in 1987, won a surprising victory with a majority of 3100 over Howells who came second with a hundred votes more than the Conservative candidate. Geraint Howells was made a life peer in the dissolution honours list published on 6 June 1992 and he took the title of Lord Geraint, of Ponterwyd in the County of Dyfed.

Within the House of Lords, Lord Geraint spoke on Welsh matters and on agriculture. He was a strong supporter of the new Welsh Language Act and of the devolution proposals placed before Parliament by the Labour Government in 1997. Until almost a month before his death, he attended the House of Lords regularly; at that time, he signed, with other Welsh peers, a letter to the *Western Mail*, which asked for a swift and positive response to the proposals of the Richard Commission Report on Welsh devolution. On 19 March 1998, he was appointed one of the five peers, from all parties, chosen to be Extra Lords in Waiting who carried out ceremonial duties for the Sovereign.

Lord Geraint continued to play an active part in Cardiganshire life after he entered the House of Lords. When a new unitary authority was formed under the name of Cardiganshire on 1 April 1996, he was disappointed when his campaign to retain the old name failed and the County Council changed the name to Ceredigion. While still a member of the Commons, he launched an appeal to provide a scanner for Bronglais Hospital, Aberystwyth. He raised more than a million pounds and, in recognition of his remarkable efforts, the new palliative care resource centre, opened at Bronglais Hospital in August 2007, was named the Ty Geraint Palliative Care Resource Centre.

A large man, with a slow rolling walk, Lord Geraint had immense personal warmth and he was widely known within his constituency and throughout Wales simply as 'Geraint'. At the same time, he was an astute politician who spoke sparingly in Parliament and on subjects within his expertise. When he joined a delegation of parliamentarians on a fact-finding mission to the Falkland Islands soon after the war with Argentina, he visited a remote sheep farm and amazed the islanders with his expert knowledge of peat drying and sheep farming. He suffered from heart trouble before the 1992 general election and he underwent, in later years, a major heart operation. He married Mary Olwen Hughes Griffiths in 1957; they had two daughters, Gaenor and Mari. Lord Geraint lived at Glennydd, Ponterwyd; he died on 17 April 2004 and his funeral was held on 24 April at Ponterwyd Calvinistic Methodist Chapel, where he served as deacon; a large crowd of mourners from Cardiganshire, from Welsh public life, and from the Liberal Party were present. He left an estate of £937, 757 net.

Author

David Lewis Jones

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personal knowledge

Further Reading

NLW Archives: [Geraint Howells. Vote Liberal](#)

NLW Archives: [Geraint Howells. Vote Liberal. Polling day: Thursday, October 10](#)

NLW Archives: [Welsh Liberal Party. Ceredigion Liberals. Geraint Howells. Liberal Candidate](#)

NLW Archives: [Pledleiswch dros Geraint Howells. Vote Liberal. Polling day: Thursday, May 3rd](#)

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

Wikipedia Article: [Geraint Howells](#)

Additional Links

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