

In 1964 the electorate of Cardiff South East faced the unusual situation of having the England cricket captain as its Conservative parliamentary candidate. Edward R. Dexter, better known as Ted, may have failed to defeat Labour's incumbent James Callaghan, but the result was far from the foregone conclusion as which it has sometimes subsequently been dismissed. The constituency was then thought of as 'super marginal'.¹ His failure has thus meant that, in hindsight, Dexter was considered by many to have been a disastrous parliamentary candidate. Yet it is still an intriguing episode and the circumstances surrounding his selection, and the nature of his campaign, also illuminate key features of local political associations, as well as the patchy, inconsistent, and sometimes incoherent organization that was the Conservative Party in Wales during this period.

Cardiff South East, which existed between 1950 and 1983, was a diverse constituency conducive to a good electoral fight. It had many features of a Labour Party marginal, including a once enormous but still active docks, as well as areas of heavy industry, but also a substantial middle class, residing particularly in the leafy suburbs of Roath, and the 'genteel villadom' of Penarth.² Here, the Conservative Party did not suffer the same chronic failures and

dismal levels of support that was common in coalfield, or 'Valleys', constituencies, although the general Welsh suspicion about Conservatism was undoubtedly present in parts of Cardiff as well.³ Nonetheless, at the 1959 general election, in a straight fight with the Conservative Party, Callaghan was re-elected to Parliament with a majority of only 868 in a contest that saw on the Conservative side 'more work, more helpers, more keenness and more enthusiasm ... than ever before'.⁴ Callaghan's Conservative opponent on that occasion was a locally popular schoolteacher called Michael Roberts, and a 'first class [parliamentary] candidate' according to the Central Office Agent for Wales at the time.⁵

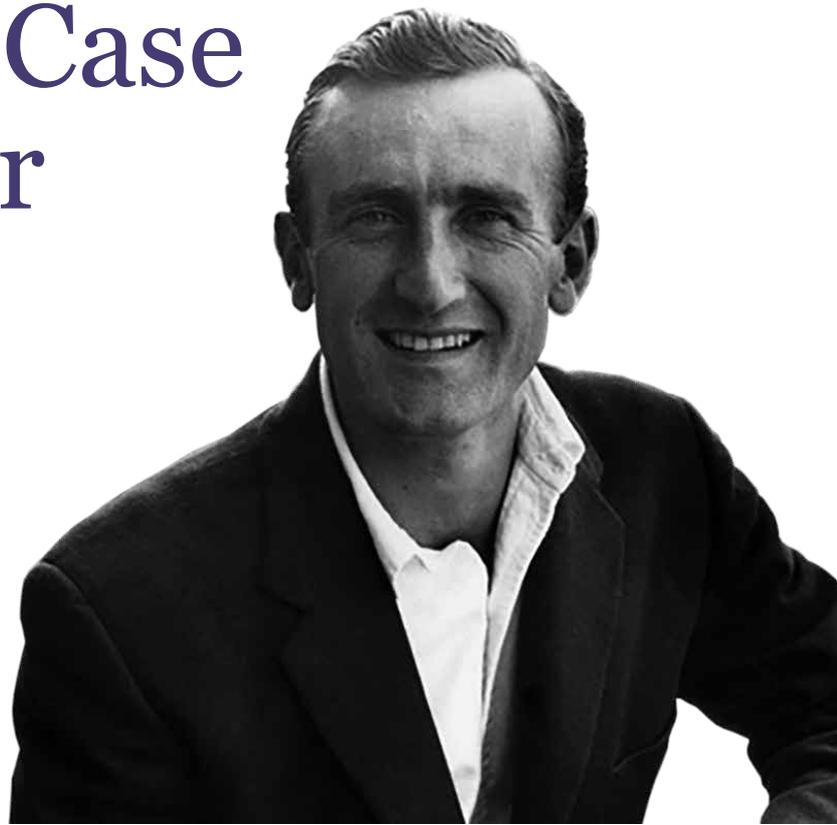
Cardiff South East Conservative Association was so delighted with having come very close to unseating a Labour Party heavyweight that its members very quickly approached Roberts to become the prospective candidate again.⁶ They were so adamant that he was the man to carry out this vital coup for the Conservative Party that they made him promise not to fight a by-election between his adoption as a candidate and the next general election.⁷

The records that have survived regarding what happened next are vague in the way that committee minute books tend to be as an historical source. They do, however, confirm that Roberts resigned

as the Conservative candidate and give the impression that he was perhaps encouraged to do so by those at the top of the Association in favour of a 'big name' alternative. Reconstructing events is made more difficult by the fact that no meeting of the constituency executive committee was held for eight months encompassing the time that Roberts resigned.⁸ The sense that the Chairman of the Association, G.V. Wynne-Jones, was scheming behind closed doors is only reinforced by his rather limp excuse – in response to complaints about the lack of dialogue within the Association – that no meetings had been held during these months because of inclement weather.⁹ Michael Roberts's own words only fuel this suspicion. Twice, in the Association's Executive Committee meeting, and at its AGM, he told those present: 'you are not finished with me yet'.¹⁰ His successful career later in Parliament as the MP for Cardiff North and Cardiff North West (he died at the dispatch box in the House of Commons) suggests he had always had serious parliamentary ambitions.¹¹ Roberts was made headmaster of the new Bishop of Llandaff School in 1963, but it is unclear whether this appointment was made before or after he resigned as a candidate. He also remained very active in the local Association, regularly speaking in support of the new parliamentary candidate, which perhaps suggests he had

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Sam Blaxland



made the decision to step down himself.

Regardless of the circumstances leading up to it, the summer of 1963 was spent searching for a new person to become the prospective Conservative candidate in Cardiff South East. Several local men who were on Central Office's approved list were interviewed, but at the last moment Wynne-Jones announced that it would be necessary to 'supplement' this list.¹² It was at this stage that Dexter appeared on the scene. It was certainly not unique for an elite amateur sportsman later to be elected as a Conservative MP but this was probably a then unique case of someone at the pinnacle of their sporting career suddenly turning to politics and attempting to take advantage of their sporting celebrity.¹³

Yet there is nothing to suggest that Ted Dexter was actively seeking a career in politics. In his autobiography he describes how the 'Gentlemen from Cardiff' actively approached him.¹⁴ He was automatically placed on the shortlist of candidates to interview.¹⁵ At the selection meetings other potential candidates spoke in depth about issues like Clause Four and the Common Market. Dexter, in contrast, told the meeting that they should be 'rightly suspicious' of him, and that his greatest attribute was that he was a 'leader' who had 'always been interested in politics'.¹⁶ He had to admit that he had never been a 'physical member' of the party.¹⁷ Later in life, Dexter added that he actually knew 'more about Italian politics than English' – a comment which, as he was standing in a Welsh constituency, speaks volumes.¹⁸ Despite this, the Association duly voted for him as their chosen candidate, as they were almost certainly always going to do. Indeed, the minutes of the AGM that followed this meeting describe so many people wanting to second Dexter's nomination that 'it was impossible to count their names'.¹⁹

The Times reported the move as a 'stunt', wryly noting that Dexter 'can hardly have been picked for his political brilliance'.²⁰ The rationale behind selecting Dexter over a more knowledgeable local candidate was clearly that a tight contest needed the publicity that someone like Dexter could generate. G.V. Wynne-Jones, who was the brains behind this decision, and who had played rugby for Wales, clearly thought that a sportsman was an ideal choice to generate this attention.²¹ But Dexter

On the day he was adopted as a candidate, Cardiff Conservatism witnessed unprecedented scenes.

was considered a big hitter in more ways than just in a cricketing context. He was 'dashing', and had a glamorous wife who was a model.²² Indeed, at his selection committee, one of the first reassurances members of the panel sought from Dexter was that his wife would be able to campaign in the constituency.²³ On the day he was adopted as a candidate, Cardiff Conservatism witnessed unprecedented scenes as a press scrum formed outside the meeting hall.²⁴ The Association revelled in this 'blaze of publicity'.²⁵ The campaign that followed

unmitigated disaster and every stereotype about the elitist and out of touch 'English' Tory was fulfilled. Dexter regularly had greater 'colossal' political and sporting commitments away from Cardiff.²⁸ The tour to the West Indies was one such example of many. When he was in the city he made front page headlines for receiving a fine for parking illegally outside the Conservatives' own offices.²⁹ In scenes that read like a P.G. Wodehouse farce, Dexter continually misunderstood the nature of a political campaign in this part of the world, apparently telling



The 'dashing' Ted Dexter captained England between 1962 and 1965 (Hulton Deutsch)

was deeply centred on Dexter. Supporters were reminded to display photos of the England captain prominently in their windows for maximum effect.²⁶ When Dexter asked permission to lead a charity cricket tour to the West Indies in January 1964, Mr T. O'Neil from the Association responded that he need not have asked, and that such a venture would be 'terrific publicity value for [Dexter's] candidature nationwide'.²⁷

Yet the campaign turned into an

steelworkers and dockers in Cardiff that Eton would be an excellent choice of school for their children.³⁰ The press widely reported (to Dexter's apparent surprise) his comments that 'our rich and powerful boys' should receive 'special educational treatment'.³¹ The Labour peer and historian Kenneth Morgan, who was a reporter based in Cardiff at the time, remembers Dexter telling the press that he knew which houses would vote Labour because they had 'dirty curtains

in the windows and unwashed milk bottles on the doorstep'.³² The *Western Mail* observed that Dexter often spoke at meetings to silence, or to heckles.³³ Fellow English club cricket players descended on Cardiff to campaign for Dexter.³⁴ The Association commissioned posters that were equally Edwardian in their tone and content which told voters:

*Don't be dim and vote for
Jim – Use your head and vote
for Ted.*³⁵

On election night 1964, Callaghan's small majority rocketed to 7,841.³⁶

In the first meeting of the Conservative Association's executive committee after the election, feelings were expressed in no uncertain terms. In 'serious criticism of the candidate', members commented that, having campaigned with Dexter, they sensed that he 'did not care about politics'.³⁷ At the same meeting, G.V. Wynne-Jones announced that he would stand down as Chairman of the Association after fifteen years' service, adding weight to the sense that the Dexter scenario had been cooked up by the Association's top brass who were now accepting the responsibility for doing so.³⁸

Over fifty years later, the incident is still one that Ted Dexter does not recall 'with much pride or pleasure'.³⁹ Kenneth Morgan interviewed him immediately after the count in 1964 and remembers him shaking and nearly in tears, claiming 'it was all my fault'.⁴⁰ The blame should hardly be laid at his door, however, but at the door of the clique of party members in Cardiff who should have understood their constituency better. The strangest revelation is that the local Association apparently brought Dexter in because, as a cricketer, they thought he would appeal to the (very small) West Indian vote in this dockside constituency.⁴¹ They should also be the target of criticism in light of the odd and undemocratic way that political associations can choose parliamentary candidates. The process and formalities associated with selecting Dexter were a façade. The Chairman had already decided Dexter was his man, probably riding roughshod over democratic spirit in the Association, and better quality candidates. Ted Dexter was an early example of celebrity politics.

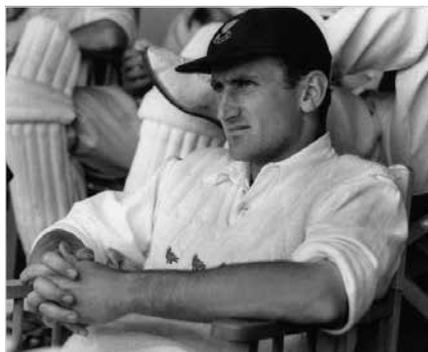
What is also particularly frustrating

Ted Dexter was an early example of celebrity politics.



Dexter after scoring 180 against Australia on the last day of the first Test at Edgbaston, 1961

about this affair is that, taken as an isolated – but high-profile – incident, it is an unduly unfair way to judge the nature and the performance of the Conservative Party in Wales at this moment in history. As the amateur captain of England, Dexter had 'something of the old style Corinthian' about him.⁴² The selection, therefore, of this quintessentially English Englishman – widely known as 'Lord Ted' – who by his own admission knew nothing about Welsh or local issues⁴³ was a particularly foolish move because it ran so contrary to a deliberate policy the Conservatives had been following for some time, with the aim of trying to make the party seem precisely less 'English', less 'alien', less 'foreign' and less elitist.⁴⁴ Although only a jocular nickname, 'Lord Ted' was standing for Parliament in a country whose past Tory representatives



'Lord Ted' struggled to connect with the voters of Cardiff (Henri Cartier-Bresson, NPG)

had indeed been noblemen and squires of whom the Welsh population was often deeply suspicious.⁴⁵

In trying to counter this, Central Office had sent a young (Welsh speaking) Enoch Powell to Wales in 1947–8 with this task of working out how a Conservative vote could be encouraged there.⁴⁶ His detailed recommendations arising from reports on 'rural' and 'industrial' conditions suggested treating Wales separately and carefully.⁴⁷ Powell also urged the creation of a Minister for Welsh Affairs, which, in a hugely symbolic move, the party pledged and then introduced when it returned to office in 1951.⁴⁸ Similarly, in 1959, a Bow Group pamphlet called *Work for Wales* authored by Geoffrey Howe and Tom Hooson called for the distinctiveness and unique features of Wales to be recognized in both party policy and presentation.⁴⁹ Throughout this period, Central Office and local Associations alike were calling for local candidates who could put the Conservative case across most effectively to the people.⁵⁰ There is no clear evidence that this was a huge success. The share of the vote received by the Conservative Party in Wales remained constantly at around 30 per cent throughout the decades after the Second World War.⁵¹ What is crucial, however, is that the party tried to adapt itself. The Dexter fiasco flew in the face of this strategy in almost every single way.

The Conservative Party, at full strength and with a perfect candidate, would probably not have won Cardiff South East. The 1964 election saw a significant swing towards Labour in Wales (reflecting the trend throughout the UK), and Callaghan was indeed a serious political heavyweight by this juncture in time. The eminent sports historian Derek Birley is wrong, however, to suggest that no one should have been concerned that Dexter could have been returned to Parliament.⁵² It is also disingenuous, or perhaps naïve, of Dexter to describe the threat he posed as 'negligible'.⁵³ Cardiff South East had indeed become marginal in 1959, and reports produced by the Conservative Party in the run-up to the election suggested that the party would win the seat by 500 votes on account of there being higher levels of private property and car ownership than in 1959.⁵⁴ The neighbouring constituency of Barry, with a diligent and locally popular MP

in Raymond Gower,⁵⁵ had weathered the swing to Labour and held onto the seat for the Conservatives.⁵⁶

It is at least possible to contemplate the notion that Michael Roberts's personal momentum may have caused an upset in 1964 had he contested that election. Although counterfactual history is a dangerous game, had a local man defeated the Shadow Chancellor, it would have been so 'rich a prize' for the Conservatives in Wales that it could have marked a

genuine sea change in the fortunes of a party which had historically struggled to find a *raison d'être* in Wales.⁵⁷ The foolish mistake of choosing 'the most inappropriate candidate imaginable' proved disastrous.⁵⁸ Cardiff South East lost its funding from Central Office for being a marginal seat as a result; Callaghan turned the constituency into a Labour Party fortress; and there was never a serious Conservative challenge there again.⁵⁹

■ **Sam Blaxland** researches modern British political history for his Ph.D. at Swansea University. He would like to thank Dr. Martin Johnes for his comments on this article, as well as Jonathan Evans – at the time of research, the outgoing MP for Cardiff North – and Lord Morgan, who both spoke at length with the author about the subject.

- 1 Welsh Political Archive (hereafter WPA), National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), City of Cardiff Conservative Associations (hereafter CCCA), GB/0210/35, Cardiff South East Conservative Association Executive Committee and Annual General Meeting minute book, 28 October 1959.
- 2 F.F.E. Aubel, *Welsh Conservatism, 1885–1935: Five Studies in Adaption* [unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Lampeter, 1994], p. 353; Kenneth O. Morgan, *Callaghan: A Life* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 50.
- 3 Gareth Elwyn Jones, *Modern Wales: A Concise History* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 251.
- 4 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 28 October 1959.
- 5 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, Annual Report 1959–60.
- 6 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 13 June 1960.
- 7 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 26 Jan 1961.
- 8 No meeting of the executive committee, or any other meetings, were held between 17 October 1962 and 27 June 1963.
- 9 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 27 June 1963.
- 10 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 31 July 1963.
- 11 Ivor Thomas Rees, *Welsh Hustings: 1885–2004* (Llandybie: Dinefwr Publishers Ltd., 2005), p. 258. By parliamentary convention, Roberts was declared to have died at St. Thomas's Hospital, not in the Palace of Westminster.
- 12 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, June 1963.
- 13 See Stephen Parkinson, 'Tory Olympians', *Conservative History Journal*, vol. II, issue 1 (2012), pp. 32–35.
- 14 Ted Dexter, *Ted Dexter Declares* (London: The Sportsmans Book Club, 1967), p. 113.
- 15 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 31 July 1963.
- 16 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 31 July 1963.
- 17 *The Times*, 2 August 1963.
- 18 Dexter, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
- 19 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 31 July 1963.
- 20 *The Times*, 31 July 1963; 10 October 1964.
- 21 *ibid.*, 10 October 1964.
- 22 Derek Birley, *A Social History of English Cricket* (London: Aurum Press, 1999), p. 292.
- 23 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 31 July 1963.
- 24 *ibid.*
- 25 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, AGM 2 April 1964.
- 26 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 16 September 1964.
- 27 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 13 November 1963.
- 28 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, AGM 2 April 1964.
- 29 *Western Mail*, 9 October 1964.
- 30 Dan O'Neill, 'How 'Lord' Ted found himself on a sticky city wicket', *Wales Online*, 4 July 2012.
- 31 *The Times*, 10 October 1964.
- 32 Interview, Lord Morgan, 8 October 2015.
- 33 *Western Mail*, 9 October 1964. At one meeting, G.V. Wynne-Jones lost his temper at a heckler, saying: 'Would the young man with the cut away collar please put away his tear-away mind'.
- 34 *The Times*, 8 October 1964.
- 35 Interview, Jonathan Evans, 21 November 2014.
- 36 'Dexter takes a trouncing from James Callaghan', *Western Mail*, 16 October 1964, p. 1.
- 37 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 18 November 1964.
- 38 *ibid.*
- 39 Letter, Edward Dexter to Sam Blaxland, 9 February 2015.
- 40 Interview, Lord Morgan, 8 October 2015.
- 41 *ibid.*
- 42 Stephen Wagg, 'Time Gentlemen Please': The Decline of Amateur Captaincy in English County Cricket', in Adrian Smith and Dilwyn Porter (eds.), *Amateurs and Professionals in Post-War British Sport* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 48.
- 43 WPA, NLW, CCCA GB/0210/35, 31 July 1963 – Dexter told the Association's AGM that his first task on becoming the candidate was to begin learning about the particular problems of Cardiff South East.
- 44 Andrew Edwards, *Labour's Crisis: Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives, and the Decline of the Labour Party in North-West Wales, 1960–74* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), p. 7.
- 45 Felix Aubel, 'The Conservatives in Wales, 1880–1935', in Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (eds.), *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880–1990* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), p. 108.
- 46 Simon Heffer, *Like the Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), p. 118.
- 47 John Gilbert Evans, *Devolution in Wales: claims and responses, 1937–1979* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), p. 49.
- 48 Conservative Party Archive (hereafter CPA), Conservative Central Office (hereafter CCO) 4/2/183, Report on Industrial Wales, 26 May 1948, p. 9.
- 49 Tom Hooson and Geoffrey Howe, *Work for Wales: Gwaith I Gymru* (London: Bow Group, 1959), p. 38.
- 50 CPA, PUB 229/12/14, J.B. Evans Election Leaflet, 1959. This piece of material urged voters to support 'the local boy', and there were many other similar sorts of documents.
- 51 Aubel 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 443.
- 52 Birley, *op. cit.*, p. 298.
- 53 Dexter, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
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- 57 Morgan, *op. cit.*, p. 195.
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