

Obituary:

David Lambie, Labour MP, schoolteacher, stalwart of the EIS, orator and Saltcoats Victoria supporter

Born 13 July 1925. Died: 16 December 2019.

David Lambie addresses workers outside the Monsanto factory at Dundonald in May 1979 (Picture: Allan Milligan/TSPL)

David Lambie, who has died at the age of 94, was a formidable and independent-minded Labour MP with a lifelong allegiance to his native Ayrshire and the town of Saltcoats.

His father, Bob Lambie, was a towering figure in Ayrshire politics for half a century whose proudest claim was that Saltcoats had the lowest council house rents in Scotland because of shrewd land acquisition in the post-war years. His mother, Beanie, started work in an Ayrshire mill at the age of ten.

Forged by this background, David was schooled in pragmatic socialism, which he practiced for the rest of his life. He had a passionate belief in education as the enabler for working-class children and in decent housing as the primary weapon in fighting poverty.

Bob, Beanie and David's wife Netta were all Provosts of Saltcoats and there was little doubt that David would progress into Labour politics. However, his first career was in education and his legacies as a negotiator on teacher salaries and professional status survive him.

David was educated at Ardrossan Academy and Glasgow University where he gained a BSc with first class honours. After a scholarship year at Geneva University, he undertook teacher training at Jordanhill and spent 20 years teaching geography, at Allan Glen's and then North Kelvinside Academy.

Teaching was poorly paid and David became a radical force within the Educational Institute of Scotland. In the words of its former depute General Secretary, Fred Forrester, the EIS was "dominated by male head teachers" with "an archaic constitution modelled on that of the Church of Scotland". It barely saw itself as a trade union.

In 1960, the Scottish Secretary, John MacLay, tentatively proposed the dilution of teaching as a graduate profession in order to address a teacher shortage. This and the question of pay led Lambie and a colleague, Arthur Houston, to call a meeting of Glasgow teachers.

The response surprised them and led, in 1961, to the first teachers' strike in the 114 year history of the EIS. MacLay set up a commission under Lord Wheatley to investigate the issues at stake and, when Labour won in 1964, the recommendation to create a General Teaching Council for Scotland, responsible for teacher certification, was implemented.

David proved as willing to take on a Labour government as a Tory one. Forrester wrote that "the clashes between Willie Ross and the EIS salaries convener, David Lambie, were legendary". They were also productive for teachers with a 16 per cent increase in 1969. David was made a Fellow of the EIS for leading the campaign.

He had also been aspiring to become MP for Bute and North Ayrshire, which included Saltcoats. Between 1955 and 1966, he fought the seat four times, three of them with the popular war hero, Sir Fitzroy MacLean, as his adversary. David narrowed the majority on each occasion.

In the run-up to the 1970 election, the MP for neighbouring Central Ayrshire, Archie Manuel, announced his retirement. David became candidate to replace him and went on to represent the constituency and later Cunninghame South until 1992 when he bequeathed his successor a majority of over 16,000.

In the House of Commons, he and Fitzroy remained friends and often allies on Ayrshire matters. David once said:

“My father taught me that if you cannot go out and have a drink with your opponents after a flaming row, you might as well chuck politics ... at the end of the day, you have to believe in your opponent’s sincerity”.

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Another quality, developed through his political upbringing and now largely lost to Scottish politics, was as a powerful orator. To the end of his days, it would never have occurred to David to read a speech or, even at the smallest branch meeting, to declaim from a sedentary position!

His maiden speech was on an Education Bill which would bring fee-paying back into Scottish state schools. He attributed the success of Scottish education to its inclusiveness: “If the system of education is bad in my part of Ayrshire, it is bad not only for working-class children but for the children of my family. That is why there has been an education lobby in Scotland that has taken in all sections of the population”.

His ingrained Ayrshire commitment made him an excellent constituency MP, continuously involved in defending jobs in ailing industries while working to bring in new ones, mainly to Irvine, with considerable if sometimes temporary success. His great crusade was for recognition of Hunterston’s deep water port as an asset with massive unfulfilled potential for the Scottish economy.

David was an early and advanced proponent of Scottish devolution. When the SLP was founded by Jim Sillars in 1976, he was touted as a possible recruit but his Labour roots went far too deep for that to be an option. He was also deeply suspicious of military adventures and a leading critic of the Falklands War.

He was chairman of the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs from 1981-87. In the latter stages of his Parliamentary career, David was part of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe and the Western European Union which had become important staging posts for countries seeking to join the EU.

In an interview to mark his 80th birthday, he was fulsome in praise of what Tony Blair’s governments had achieved with the caveat that he had latterly moved decision-making away from Parliament and Cabinet to a coterie around him. “The reason he could do this is the reason Thatcher could do it – too big a majority in a democratic system is a disaster”.

After retiring, David became active in Cunninghame Housing Association, one of the largest in Scotland. He maintained his lifetime support for Saltcoats Victoria and took great pleasure from his extensive family.

He and Netta, herself a much respected political figure, were married for 66 years. She survives him along with four daughters, a son, 12 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

BRIAN WILSON