

Evans, Sir (Worthington) Laming Worthington-, first baronet (1868–1931), *politician* by Robert C. Self

Evans, Sir (Worthington) Laming Worthington-, first baronet (1868–1931), politician, was born at Broadstairs, Kent, on 23 August 1868, the elder son of Worthington Evans (1827–1901) of Isleworth and his second wife, Susanna Jane (*d.* 1891), daughter of James Laming, of Birchington Hall, Kent. He was educated at Eastbourne College, and was articled to his father, a solicitor in the City of London, at the age of seventeen, being admitted a solicitor in 1890 and eventually becoming head of the firm of Worthington Evans, Daune & Co. On 5 November 1898 he married Gertrude Annie (*d.* 1947), younger daughter of William Hale, of London; they had a son and a daughter. During this period he published *Notes on the Companies Acts* and his expertise in this field prompted his appointment as member of the Board of Trade committee for the reform of company law in 1905. In 1906 he unsuccessfully contested the borough of Colchester as a Conservative, but at the general election of January 1910 Evans gained the seat (which in 1918 became the Colchester division), and he held it until in 1929 he was returned for the St George's division of Westminster by a very large majority.

In the Commons, Worthy, as he was widely known, immediately established his reputation as a skilful parliamentary tactician and effective debater during the passage of Lloyd George's National Insurance Bill. Using the actuarial knowledge and experience of friendly societies acquired as a City solicitor, Evans assembled a small committee to decide what to commend and what to condemn in a measure his party wished to welcome in principle but attack in detail. During 1911 he also joined Lord Hugh Cecil, F. E. Smith, and others in a group seated below the gangway committed to harrying the Liberal government in a manner reminiscent of the Fourth Party in the 1880s.

On the outbreak of war in 1914 Evans served at York as inspector of administrative services to northern command with the temporary rank of major. In May 1915 he was appointed parliamentary private secretary to the financial secretary to the War Office, and from January to December 1916 he was controller of the foreign trade department of the Foreign Office. During the Lloyd George wartime coalition he served as parliamentary secretary (later also financial secretary) to the Ministry of Munitions until July 1918, when he became minister of blockade and under-secretary at the Foreign Office, serving until the general election in December. He was created a baronet on 15 November 1916, when he assumed by royal licence the additional surname Worthington and was sworn of the privy council in September 1918.

During the post-war coalition Worthington-Evans became increasingly closely involved with Lloyd George as a loyal member of his inner circle. Having proved a competent minister of pensions since January 1919, he became minister without portfolio in April 1920 with a seat in the cabinet, and from February 1921 until October 1922 he served as secretary of state for war. From spring 1920 Worthington-Evans attended many of the post-war conferences with the prime minister and played a particularly significant role in negotiations over German reparations. He was also one of seven British negotiators who agreed the Irish treaty in December 1921. He was appointed GBE in June 1922. In domestic affairs his pre-war support for the Unionist Social Reform Committee made him sympathetic to the coalition's social reform aspirations: he worked sympathetically with Addison and demonstrated an enlightened attitude as pensions minister by increasing old age payments. Politically, Worthington-Evans supported 'fusion' between the coalition parties in 1920 and was a vocal advocate of an early general election in December 1921 to achieve the same objective by the back door. As a result, at the decisive Carlton Club meeting in October 1922 he was one of the 'first-class brains' who remained loyal to Lloyd George and went into the political wilderness rather than join the bulk of his party in office.

During the next year Worthington-Evans was torn between supporting his party and coalition, and between loyalty to the rejected Conservative former ministers under Austen Chamberlain and the pursuit of his own personal ambitions under Bonar Law. Although he remained formally committed to the Chamberlainite group and its strategy of abstaining from office until the collapse of the Law government opened the way for a renewed coalition, from the outset he was rightly suspected of being anxious to desert and return to office at any cost. After being considered for the Ministry of Health early in 1923, he accepted from Baldwin the office of postmaster-general in May 1923, explaining to Chamberlain, 'I don't want to see the Baldwin Government fail, if it fails the Tory party fails' (Dutton, 204).

The transition did little for Worthington-Evans's reputation either with his former Chamberlainite allies who despised his careerist disloyalty or with his new cabinet colleagues—particularly as he relentlessly and publicly manoeuvred for promotion during 1923. Probably because of his suspect loyalties, he was the only ministerial protectionist not to be consulted about the revival of tariff reform before its announcement to cabinet in October 1923, but he soon became part of the inner group directing election strategy. His compromising involvement in the 'Birkenhead plot' to displace Baldwin and create an anti-socialist coalition between the Unionist losses in the general election of December 1923 and the fall of Baldwin's government in January 1924 forfeited much of this new acceptance. His return to the War Office in Baldwin's second ministry of 1924–9 was notable largely for his continued reduction in army estimates over five successive years.

As a politician Worthington-Evans possessed several substantial strengths. By common consent he was clever, a shrewd judge of political and electoral strategy, and possessed of a broad vision on complex questions well beyond his own department. He was also an effective debater capable of speaking at short notice on a wide variety of topics and an excellent chairman of committees. Above all, his real interest and expertise in finance made him an authoritative and valued adviser on these matters throughout his career. Yet despite this ability and a genial personality, his progress was inhibited by three significant defects. First, his booming voice and rather loud manner, attributed to his lack of public-school and university education, suggested an air of unpolished vulgarity which created disdain in some quarters within the party. Second, his earlier attachment to Lloyd George, his alignment with the Chamberlainites after 1922, and his support for an anti-socialist arrangement with the Liberals after electoral defeats in 1923 and 1929 reinforced the damaging taint of coalitionist sympathies in a party hostile to such sentiments after the Carlton Club revolt. Finally, there was the omnipresent suspicion of unbridled ambition and cynical opportunism. Always conspicuously supporting the person most able to further his own career, after Worthington-Evans's shift in allegiances in May 1923 Curzon's phrase 'worthy reasons' became a euphemism for such brazen opportunism (Gilbert, 5.133). Two months later, his efforts to use the Post Office public relations department to accelerate his ministerial promotion in Baldwin's first government were such a 'dreadful fiasco' that Attlee still recalled them with disdain over a quarter of a century later (H. Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters, 1945–1962*, 1968, 136). Thereafter, Austen Chamberlain spoke for many in the valedictory comment that Worthington-Evans 'was a very useful member of our counsels & personally a very good fellow tho' a bit of a bounder in manner' (*Austen Chamberlain Diary*, 363). Although perhaps he possessed many of the qualities necessary to fulfil his principal ambition of becoming chancellor of the exchequer, this background and reputation always precluded him from serious consideration. A heart condition meant that he suffered from periodic poor health throughout the late 1920s, and he died suddenly in his sleep at his residence at 6 Eaton Place, London, on 14 February 1931.

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Sources

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Archives

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Likenesses

W. Stoneman, photograph, 1925, NPG □ M. Webb, plaque, St Margaret's Church, Westminster

Wealth at death

£118,562 15s. 7d.: probate, 16 April 1931, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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