

REVIEW: A PARLIAMENT FOR WALES

Isobel Lindsay

John Osmond (ed.) **A Parliament for Wales**, Llandysul, Dyfed: Gomer, £9.50, pb, ISBN 1859021735, 288pp.

'We must see the campaign for a Welsh Parliament as a celebration of these ideals that bind us together and the things that we share - our joy at being Welsh, our delight in our literature and our culture.' Paul Flynn, Labour M.P., Newport West.

Are these the words you could envisage any of our Scottish MPs using? National cultural differences are not entirely a figment of our imagination but there are, of course, many things which we share in the constitutional debate.

Our knowledge of what happens in Wales or in the English regions is often slight. Information is mediated by the metropolitan media which has little interest in the 'provincial'. The Scottish media has not seen it as part of their role except where Scottish and Welsh issues touch - for example, in relation to Scottish and Welsh Office budgets or competition for industrial projects.

A new and very topical collection of essays, **A Parliament for Wales**, is therefore particularly welcome at this juncture. It helps us to assess where the Welsh debate is going, what are the similarities and differences from the Scottish situation. The book is the outcome of the Democracy Conference organised by the Parliament for Wales Campaign in 1994.

One important theme which emerges is the extent of change in Wales. John Osmond, the editor, stresses this in his introduction: 'Wales in the 1990s is a very different place from the Wales of the 1970s.' This backdrop of social and economic change is common to many of the contributions.

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Unlike Scotland, the Welsh economy has not seen the same pattern of deindustrialisation. Wales is a rare example of a European country where the proportion of manufacturing jobs is rising. This has come from a strong flow of inward investment. Wales has the largest concentration of Japanese firms in Europe. Over the past decade 130 firms from mainland Europe have come into Wales. But this increase in manufacturing employment has been accompanied by a dramatic decline elsewhere. Mining has gone from 43,000 in 1979 to a few hundred. The steel industry has lost 50,000 jobs. There has been an accelerating decline in agricultural employment, threatening the stability of rural Wales and it is rural Wales which has been so central in maintaining Welsh as a working language.

So the Welsh economy has seen its traditional sectors with their strong cultural identity decline but an expansion in new foreign-owned manufacturing. It may be that the decline in the traditional transmitters of Welsh culture and identity has produced a greater receptiveness to the need to sustain these through positive action.

Barry Jones of the University of Wales discusses another important area of change since 1979, the structure of government. The Welsh Office, not established till 1965, has increased its role in the past decade. The strengthening of the role of Quangos under its control has been particularly marked. The Welsh Development Agency was given an expanded role. The Land Authority for Wales and the Development Board for Rural Wales were allowed to continue. Wales got its own Higher and Further Education Funding Council. The number of Quangos at the all-Wales level has doubled since 1979. The pattern has been the familiar one of packing these with Conservative supporters.

The Welsh Office was quite enterprising in developing a European dimension with technological collaboration agreements with Baden-Württemberg, Catalonia, Lombardy and Rhône-Alpes. But the administrative developments in Wales, as in Scotland, have involved a substantial decline in local government powers and the absence of democratic accountability.

Ironically, a Government expressly hostile to Scottish and Welsh Parliaments has, through its local government reform in both these countries, greatly strengthened the functionalist case for these Parliaments. Unlike the pattern emerging in England from the Local Government Commission, Scotland and Wales will have small numbers of unitary authorities, 32 and 22 respectively. By eliminating one tier of local government and reducing the size of the

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existing larger units, they have undermined their own case. The argument of 'overgovernment' evaporates. The need for a larger authority for certain strategic functions increases. It is yet another example of the Government shooting itself in the foot.

Culturally there have also been changes. The language issue is still controversial and divisive but less so than fifteen years ago. The position of Welsh has become more confident and less defensive. There has been, as Hywel Francis points out, a recent and welcome recognition that many of the language enthusiasts of the past were purist and exclusive, contemptuous of the language of the working-class. The Welsh Language Channel is now well-established and there has been improved BBC provision for Wales in both Welsh and English. The press picture has been more patchy, with a fairly successful **Wales on Sunday** and an expansion of community newspapers but an overall decline in press readership.

The current constitutional debate takes place in a Wales which is in some respects more confident and where, as in Scotland, the Thatcher years have increased support for a Welsh Parliament. That support is weaker than in Scotland but is now a majority (see article by John Osmond elsewhere in this issue of **Scottish Affairs**). Even Jonathen Evans, the Conservative MP for Brecon, refers to 'the resurgence of support for a Welsh Assembly'.

The position of the parties in Wales differs significantly from those in Scotland. Plaid Cymru, while having one more seat than the SNP, has less than half the popular vote. It has never taken the 'independence nothing less' position. The Plaid MP, Cynog Dafis, comments in his contribution:

Plaid Cymru's preference for 'self-government' (in preference to 'independence') tells us something, perhaps, of the party's emphasis on the reality of independence in the modern world....The concept of Britain has undoubted legitimacy.

The current Labour position in Wales is rather like that in Scotland ten years ago. Peter Hain who contributes to the book is an enthusiast, as is the current shadow Welsh secretary, Ron Davies. But there are still those who are less than enthusiastic and the extent of powers for a Welsh parliament, and, indeed, whether it should be a legislature, is still the subject of 'consultations'. One of the omissions in the book, strangely enough, is a chapter reviewing these constitutional options.

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The question of women and the Parliament, discussed by Sian Edwards, is an excellent example of the cross-fertilisation between Scotland and Wales. Despite the Welsh 'Mam', Wales has been an even more male-dominated society in public life than Scotland. Only one of the Welsh M.P.s is a woman and only 11% of county councillors. The developments in the Scottish debate on women's representation have been picked up and progressed in the Welsh context. Plaid Cymru in 1993 adopted 50/50 in its proposals for a Welsh Parliament and the Parliament for Wales Campaign has also supported it. The issue is part of the current consultation exercise by the Welsh Labour Party.

Most of the book looks ahead to how the opportunities offered by a new Parliament should be used. At this stage this is where we should also be directing the Scottish debate.

Wales has had less discretion in education policy than Scotland traditionally has and education issues in Wales are also linked to the language issue. For a Welsh Parliament, these would be of central concern. David Reynolds, now Professor of Education at Newcastle University, examines the high levels of educational under-achievement in Wales in comparison with Scotland and England, although the performance in Welsh-medium schools has been better. Reynolds analyses developments in Welsh education over the past decade and future policy options:

Somehow we need to use the local, the community and the Welsh identity, not to build nationalistic cultural walls to repel outside influences but to create a strong identity on which individuals can draw as they look outwards. Using the Welsh educational system to build that national identity is something that Wales may still have a chance of doing.

A vision most of us would share.

January 1995