

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF WELSH POLITICS

John Osmond

Much as in Scotland, politics in Wales revolve around a contradiction that while the Labour Party consistently wins a large majority of seats, more often than not the Conservatives rule on the basis of the support they achieve in southern England. This has been the case for the most of this century. During much of the time the contradiction has quietly festered. In the latest phase since 1979, however, and especially in the 1990s, Conservative arrogance has provoked Labour to new heights of frustration and pushed a resolution of the contradiction to centre stage.

This contradiction at the centre of Welsh politics has been sharply brought into focus during the past year as the Conservatives have plumbed new depths in unpopularity. The party were beaten by Plaid Cymru into third place in the 1994 Euro-elections (see Table 1). In the Islwyn by-election in February 1995 the Conservative candidate trailing fourth, behind Labour, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats, lost his deposit. A week later, an opinion poll, which asked a sample of the Welsh electorate how they would vote in the next general election, registered just 12 per cent support for the Conservatives.

Much of Welsh political life is now controlled by the Welsh Office. When it was first established, in 1964, it had few functions and little financial clout. Over thirty years all that has changed. Today the Welsh Office controls virtually every aspect of Welsh domestic life. Its civil servants have increased from 200 to more than 2,000. From just £200m its annual budget has expanded to nearly £7 billion which is approaching 70 per cent of public expenditure in Wales.

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More often than not the Welsh Office rules through appointed Quangos like the Welsh Development Agency, Wales Tourist Board and Higher Education Funding Council. These all-Wales Quangos have doubled in number to 80 since 1979. They employ some 60,000 people. If such agencies as the 102 housing associations, 22 local hospital trusts, and the 26 governing bodies of the Further Education Colleges are also included, then the number of appointed bodies runs to more than 300. The Council of Welsh Districts has identified 350 'bodies which fulfil a public purpose, are financed by public expenditure and are controlled by appointees' (Council of Welsh Districts 1995).

Welsh Quangoland, as it has become known, now has equivalent spending power and is undoubtedly more influential than elected local government. During the 1993-4 financial year Welsh Quangos were responsible for spending £2.4 billion - that is 34 per cent of the Welsh Office budget. The entire revenue budget for Welsh local authorities was only a shade higher, at £2.5 billion. Underway in Wales is a reorganisation of local government which, from April 1996, will merge the present eight county councils and 37 districts into a single tier of 22 councils. Then the number of elected councillors will fall from 1,974 to 1,273, making them fewer than 1,400 appointments the Secretary of State for Wales makes to the 80 all-Wales Quangos.

Over the last 15 years this government machine at the all-Wales level has pushed through policies in key areas of the economy, education and the health service that are far from congenial to mainstream Welsh political opinion. As a result the Welsh Labour Party is finding new resolve in its commitment to establishing a Welsh Assembly, Senedd or Parliament that would ensure that whatever party was in power at Westminster, a majority of Wales representatives would have their hands on the levers of Welsh Office power. In response the Conservatives - facing a permanent threat to their Welsh power base - are insisting that Labour's plans are threatening the integrity of the United Kingdom.

THE POLITICS OF CONFRONTATION

In the past, Conservative Secretaries of State for Wales have generally kept a low profile on the constitution, not wishing to stir up controversy in a territory where they lack a mandate. But the present incumbent, John Redwood, has seized on the question, and there is hardly a pronouncement issuing forth from the Welsh Office these days which fails to refer to it. At

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the last Conservative Party Conference, for instance, Redwood constantly drew attention to the Home Rule 'threat'. In a platform speech he said it would lead to an English backlash, loss of cash from Whitehall and fewer Welsh MPs at Westminster. And he told a fringe meeting of the Conservative

Table 1

Welsh Election Results And Opinion Polls
(Figures give % poll followed by number of seats in brackets)

	Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Plaid Cymru
1987 General Election	45.1 (24)	29.5 (8)	17.9 (3)	7.3 (3)
1992 General Election	49.5 (27)	28.6 (6)	12.4 (1)	9.0 (4)
March 1994 BBC Wales Opinion poll	60	16	9	13
June 1994 Euro-Election	55.9 (5)	14.6 (0)	8.7 (0)	17.1 (0)
Feb 1995 BBC Wales Opinion Poll	66	12	8	13

General elections and Euro-elections cannot be easily compared, because of differential turn-out. Nevertheless, a comparison can be made by examining how much of its 1992 vote the parties mobilised in 1994. According to figures produced by Denis Balsom of the Politics Department at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth this reveals the following percentages:

% of 1992 vote mobilised in 1994

	Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Plaid Cymru
Wales	61.3	27.7	37.9	103.1
North Wales seat	62.2	24.7	33.2	142.3

Way Forward Group that nationalists who want a 'Europe of the Regions' should remember that Welsh was not an official language of the European Union.

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It is the political views and personality of John Redwood, and latterly those of his new Under Secretary of State at the Welsh Office, Clwyd North-West MP Rod Richards, that have done a great deal to focus discontent. Redwood's immediate predecessors as Secretary of State, Peter Walker and David Hunt - though also representing English constituencies - went down relatively well, in part because their policy approach was markedly different, and certainly different in tone, to the way more Thatcherite policies were applied in England. Peter Walker, for instance, was quite open about his emollient brand of Conservatism being applied in Wales as an experiment. Hence the well-publicised Initiative to regenerate the former coal-mining valleys of South Wales.

John Redwood, on the other hand, has been uncompromising in a series of policies on education, industry, Europe and local government, not to say his well publicised attack on single mothers. When he was appointed in May 1993 Opposition politicians did not hide their dismay. 'The new viceroy Mr Redwood is the last straw,' said the Welsh Liberal Democrat leader, Montgomery MP Alex Carlile. 'To impose an Englishman with views so at odds with the people of Wales is dangerously patronising.'

Four months later it was revealed that Redwood had spent only one night in Wales since his appointment - to attend the Welsh Conservative Conference at Llangollen. This revelation prompted the comment from Plaid Cymru's President Dafydd Wigley: 'The job is becoming more and more that of a governor-general and losing sight of its original purpose of being a voice for Wales in the Cabinet.'

More often than not such criticisms are the result of an aggressiveness John Redwood has displayed towards any sense of a special Welsh political culture that warrants special treatment. There are many examples, but a number have been outstanding. The first applies to Welshness itself and the way Wales is projected in the world.

In the light of the devolution referendum result a paradox of the Conservative tenure at the Welsh Office since 1979 is the extent to which an all-Wales level of government has been elaborated, albeit administrative bureaucratic government. As has been described, the powers and budget of the Welsh Office have been extended and the number of Quangos increased. Though this has been to a great extent at the expense of autonomous local government, it has served to entrench an institutional sense of Welsh identity.

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Alongside this, too, has been an audacious initiative in establishing what in effect has been the beginning of a Welsh foreign policy. A Brussels Bureau to represent Wales within the institutions of the European Union has been established and important economic and cultural agreements negotiated with the leading Four Motor Regions in Europe - Baden-Wurttemberg, Rhônes Alpes, Lombardy and Catalunya. 'Wales is becoming an important player on the international stage,' declared the long-serving Minister of State at the Welsh Office, Sir Wyn Roberts, as he signed the latest Declaration of Co-operation, with Lombardy in February 1994.

Yet only weeks earlier, in a calculated rebuff to the central thrust of this policy, John Redwood ordered the Welsh Development Agency to drop the marketing theme 'Wales in Europe' from its promotional literature. Instead, in accordance with his Unionist and Europhobic approach, it was to print brochures emphasising that Wales was an integral part of the UK. The Union flag rather than Y Ddraig Goch (the Welsh Dragon) was to be given pride of place in the WDA's literature on the grounds that foreign investors were supposedly confused by material emphasising Wales as a dynamic Region in a borderless European Union.

Education has proved another area of controversy, because of John Redwood's zeal for schools opting out of local authority control. So far, just 11 of Wales' 227 secondary schools and 5 of the 1,704 primary schools have opted out. At the end of July 1994 the Welsh Office put an order before Parliament requiring all school governors to debate opting out at least once a year. Added cash incentives were also made for schools opting out. The existing opted-out schools received a £7.5m capital allocation for the 1994-5 financial year - that is an average of £500,000 each, compared with an average of just £21,230 for the remaining schools.

The latest test case came at the West Monmouth Secondary School in Gwent where a second vote on opting out was insisted on by the Welsh Office following allegations that the first vote, registering 60 per cent of parents against opting-out, had not been properly carried out. The second vote, in mid-November 1994, registered 70 per cent of the parents against opting out.

John Redwood's general approach to politics is outlined in his book **The Global Marketplace: Capitalism and its Future** (Redwood 1994). In it he states that 'cultural difference is just one more product variation in the advance of global style and the global marketplace'. Presumably that outlook lay behind his frustration, recorded in the same pages, that 'if an Englishman enters a shop in Welsh-speaking parts of Wales the locals are likely to switch

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promptly to speaking Welsh'. He is presently causing a fuss by refusing to sign Welsh Office letters written in Welsh - because, he says, he doesn't understand them. Does that mean, it is asked, that if he were to move to the Foreign Office he would refuse to sign letters written in French or German?

Such insensitivities have one way and another touched most areas of Welsh life. John Redwood has even attacked the Welsh churches. In his 1994 Christmas message he attacked the churches for failing to teach morality and instructed the Curriculum Council for Wales to prepare new guidelines on religious teaching in schools. This drew the response from the Archbishop of Wales, the Right Rev Alwyn Rice Jones, that the attack was merely code for the Conservatives' 'back to basics' law and order agenda.

An even more astonishing attack came from Redwood's lieutenant at the Welsh Office, Rod Richards. In an interview in the Welsh language monthly magazine, **Barn** (Opinion) in December 1994 he described Welsh Labour councillors as 'short, fat, slimy and fundamentally corrupt'. This led to calls for his resignation and a threatened boycott of meetings at the Welsh Office by the Welsh local authority associations.

TORY QUANGOLAND

Even more disturbing than name-calling has been the increasingly partisan political appointments made by the Conservatives to the Quangos. For example, Ian Grist, who lost his Cardiff North seat to Labour at the 1992 election was appointed chairman of South Glamorgan Health Authority not long afterwards. Beata Brookes, the former Conservative MEP for North Wales and chair of the Welsh Conservative Party, has recently been re-appointed chair of the Welsh Consumer Council.

Leading figures on the most powerful Quangos running Wales invariably have Conservative connections. It has been revealed, for instance, that the Chairman of the Welsh Development Agency and also the Development Board for Rural Wales, David Rowe-Beddoe, has been a member of the Conservatives Abroad Strategy Committee and also chairman of its branch in Monaco where he has a home.

It is not just a question of appointments having a political edge, but the way the same personalities keep cropping up time and again. Between them they are creating an intermeshed network of influence. Many leading Quango figures also run key cultural institutions in Wales. For instance, the membership of the Board of the Welsh National Opera and the Council of

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the National Museum is a useful beginning for a gazetteer of the Welsh establishment. The chairman of the National Museum's Council is Timothy Edwards, brother of Nicholas Edwards, Lord Crickhowell, the former Secretary of State for Wales who is now chairman of the National Rivers Authority, chairman of the Cardiff Bay Arts Trust and also a member of the Board of the Welsh National Opera. The deputy chairman of the Museum's Council is Matthew Prichard, a cousin of Lord Crickhowell and a former chairman of the Arts Council of Wales.

The most comprehensive survey of Quangos in Wales has been undertaken by David Hanson, Labour MP for Delyn. In December 1993 he published a survey of 452 appointees to 51 executive Welsh Quangos. Amongst his findings were: fewer than a quarter of the appointees were women; only 7 of the 51 Quangos surveyed had women as chairs; 114 of the appointees were directors or partners in business; 12 held posts with the CBI and 4 were members of the Institute of Directors; and 16 were employed by companies that had made donations to the Conservative Party.

The political affiliation of 36 appointees in the survey who could be readily identified was: 20 Conservatives, 14 Labour, 1 Plaid Cymru, and 1 Liberal Democrat. There were 10 Deputy Lieutenants, 8 High Sheriffs, 14 OBEs, 9 MBEs, 15 CBEs, 7 Knighthoods, 5 Honourables, 2 Peers, 1 Brigadier, 1 Major, 1 Lady in Waiting to the Princess Royal, and 1 wife of a former Cardiff Conservative MP. It is hard to avoid David Hanson's conclusion that Wales's Quangos are 'overstuffed with white male businessmen, lawyers and accountants, with a sprinkling of establishment figures for good measure. The pattern of appointments represents the face of the Conservative Party and their sympathisers, not the people of Wales.' (Hanson 1993)

Since John Redwood became Welsh Secretary, Quango rule has provided the backcloth for an important shift in Welsh politics which he has nudged along. He has engendered a confrontational atmosphere in which the traditional disputes between the Opposition parties in the Commons, especially Plaid Cymru and Labour, have tended to be overlain by a common outrage against the Conservatives. Interestingly, this has taken on a Welsh/English dimension as well with, for the first time in a generation, Labour politicians regularly referring to the Conservatives as Unionists. One of John Redwood's main achievements in Welsh politics may turn out to have been assisting Welsh Labour politicians in re-discovering their national roots.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

Another key part of the background of Welsh devolution politics in the 1990s is the reorganisation of local government that the Conservative government is forcing through against the combined opposition of Labour, Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru. This presents a further contradiction since, though the pro-devolution parties are opposed to what the Conservatives are doing, there is no doubt that the creation of a single tier of 22 new authorities, to replace the present 8 counties and 37 districts, has been extremely influential in placing a Welsh Assembly or Parliament back on the Welsh political agenda. Indeed, so much is this the case that, behind-the-scenes, a number of pro-devolution Welsh MPs worked hard to ease the passage of the legislation through Parliament during 1993-4.

There is agreement across the Opposition parties that an all-Wales body is more acceptable if there is a single tier of local government below it. There is a common perception that creating the single tier in advance of devolution will help considerably in promoting the argument for change. Moreover, there is a general understanding that it will also remove many vested interests against change - especially from Labour county councillors.

Nonetheless, before this happened there was much ritualised debate which has contributed as much as the arguments over Quango appointments to the polarisation of Welsh politics in the 1990s. Nowhere was this more clearly seen than in the debate over Parliamentary procedure in March 1994 to allow the Welsh local government reorganisation Bill to pass from the floor of the House of Commons to Committee. To achieve this the Government had to suspend Standing Order No 86 of the House of Commons. This procedural convention, unique to Wales, provides that 'for the consideration of any public bill relating exclusively to Wales, the committee shall be so constituted as to include all Members sitting for constituencies in Wales'.

The Standing Order was established in 1907, in the wake of the general election of the previous year in which the Conservatives were completely wiped out in Wales. Undoubtedly it was a gesture by the triumphant Liberals aimed at enshrining Wales's national identity. This was pointed out during the debate on its suspension by the Cardiff Central Labour MP Jon Owen Jones, who before he was elected in 1992 was chairman of the Campaign for a Welsh Assembly, now the Parliament for Wales Campaign. He quoted from Hansard 87 years earlier when, in the debate establishing the Standing Order, the Conservative Member for Gravesend, Sir Gilbert Parker,

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remarked, 'behind the proposals of the Prime Minister is a process of devolution... intended to lead up to the larger policy'.

The Standing Order also provides that the size of a Committee shall not exceed 50, so, given there are 32 Opposition MPs sitting for Welsh constituencies, unless it was suspended the Conservatives would lose their majority. To circumvent this they proposed the Committee should be made up of 28 members, with 15 drawn from the Government's side, involving the drafting in of nine English Conservatives to shore up the six Welsh Conservative MPs. The result was that the Opposition was only allowed 13 places, when there were 32 Labour, Plaid Cymru and Liberal Democrat MPs all anxious to have a say about legislation that affected all their localities, and, not least in many cases, their constituency boundaries as well.

Uniquely all 32 had combined on a Labour amendment opposing the Second Reading of the Bill because, amongst other defects, '... it fails to establish a directly elected all Wales tier of government.' As both the Shadow Secretary of State, Ron Davies, and Plaid Cymru's President, Dafydd Wigley, pointed out, this was the first occasion on which such an amendment had united all Opposition members representing Welsh constituencies against the Second Reading of a Bill relating exclusively to Wales.

Predictably, therefore, the Conservatives' steam-rolling of the Bill by suspending Standing Orders drew an outraged response. 'The nature of the United Kingdom is at stake tonight,' said Labour's spokesman Rhodri Morgan, MP for Cardiff West. 'The UK is not one homogeneous nation state comprising 651 Members of Parliament who all represent the same sort of constituency. As its name shows the United Kingdom is amalgam of four different home countries...'

'The UK works', Rhodri Morgan continued, 'because there is protection for the smaller parts of the United Kingdom - Scotland and Wales - to prevent them from being abused and pushed around by the much larger majority, England, when legislation goes through the House... The Government are trying to turn the Standing Committee into another Quango and pack it with Tory placemen in exactly the same way as they have done with all Quangos.'

The importance of John Redwood is that his origins as an English MP (for Wokingham), compounded by his actions and demeanour in office as Secretary of State for Wales, have served to dramatise for the Welsh people the points being made and largely unreported by Rhodri Morgan in the House of Commons on 16 March 1994.

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LABOUR'S RESPONSE AT WESTMINSTER

Labour's present commitment to an Assembly for Wales is in large measure a response to such Parliamentary debates, together with the blatantly partisan appointments to the Quangos, described above. In the process the administration at the Welsh Office has come to be seen as not just an unrepresentative, but also an autocratic and alien, régime. The commitment stands in stark contrast to Labour's divisions in the 1970s when sections of the party, led by Neil Kinnock (then MP for Bedwellty), sabotaged the policy in the 1979 referendum. At the same time a remarkable feature of the devolution politics of the 1990s in Wales, compared with the 1970s, is the shift in position of the main protagonists inside the Welsh Labour Party.

In the 1970s it was the leadership in Wales - on the Welsh Executive and within the Wales TUC - that made the running. Meanwhile, it was the party in Parliament which brought change to a grinding halt, first by combining with other renegade Labour MPs from Scotland and England to force a referendum, and then using it to campaign vocally and effectively against their party's official policy.

In the 1990s these positions have been reversed. Now it is the party in Parliament that, with a few exceptions, is making the case for change and trying to achieve as radical a consensus for it as possible. Meanwhile, at home the dominant voice on both the Welsh Labour Executive and inside the Wales TUC is for caution, a minimalist position and extreme hostility to any attempt at embracing progressive forces outside the Labour movement. An examination of why this shift has taken place reveals a good deal about the subterranean dynamics moving and grinding below the apparent inertia and placidity of mid-1990s Welsh politics.

The reversal of position in Parliament is the easiest to chart. A generational change in MPs has resulted in a radical shift on the devolution issue within the Welsh Parliamentary Labour Party. There are now 13 out of the present 27 Welsh Labour MPs who have entered the Commons since 1979 and who are all enthusiasts, albeit in varying degrees, for bringing the Welsh Office and the Quangos under the control of some kind of elected all-Wales body. Only three of the Labour MPs who have taken their seats since 1979 can be said to be lukewarm or hostile to the issue and two of those are safely inside the shadow administration. One of them, Kim Howells, MP for Pontypridd, has responsibility within the shadow Home Office team for co-ordinating

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devolution policy for the whole of the United Kingdom. The other, Paul Murphy, MP for Torfaen, is a shadow Northern Ireland spokesman.

Meanwhile, the Welsh MPs who campaigned most vigorously against devolution in the 1970s have all either left the Commons or recanted on the issue. In the 1979 referendum campaign a famous, or infamous, 'Gang of Six' MPs - named after a comparable group in Beijing - led the opposition. Since then, their leading figure Neil Kinnock has not only left for pastures new with the European Commission but actually declared his conversion in favour of an Assembly. Ifor Davies (Gower), Fred Evans (Caerphilly), and Ioan Evans (Aberdare) are all dead. Leo Abse (Pontypool) is still unreconciled but retired.

The only one left in the Commons is Donald Anderson (Swansea East) but like Kinnock he, too, announced his conversion, in an article in the **Western Mail** in January 1992 during the run-up to the election of that year: 'The heady nationalism of the 60s and 70s has spent its force,' he wrote. 'The case for decentralisation and democratic control on a UK basis is stronger. There is today the makings of a consensus on local government reorganisation. In any event devolution will elbow its way on to the stage of active political debate for there is the Scottish question...'

Quite apart from the generational change amongst the Welsh Labour MPs, it is fair to say that all have been radicalised to at least some extent by the uncongenial experience of ten years and more facing an increasingly arrogant and dismissive Welsh Office administration across the dispatch box at Westminster. The passage of the Welsh Language Bill through the House of Commons in the early 1990s was a case in point. A reading of the debates, and particularly the response of MPs to the refusal of the Government to allow the Welsh language official status as part of the new Welsh Language Act, reveals an extraordinarily nationalist tone in the utterances of a wide cross-section of Welsh Labour MPs, a tone that would have been inconceivable in the 1970s.

And as has been discussed above, the pattern was repeated when the government steamrollered its local government reorganisation legislation through Parliament. This time the tone became even more shrill as MPs felt their own personal constituency interests affected as well as a general principle.

LABOUR'S RESPONSE IN WALES

At the same time, however, the party leadership in Wales itself has been endeavouring to keep the forces for change in check, if not actually back-peddalling then certainly endeavouring to keep movement to a minimum. A first explanation is a fear of 1979 repeating itself. Many who were directly involved in the experience of the referendum of that year, and that includes a large majority on the Welsh Executive, find it hard believe that things have really changed sufficiently to risk so soon a repeat of the angry debates, the divisions, and finally the rejection that the 1979 referendum brought about. For unlike in Scotland, where there was a small majority in favour of a Scottish Assembly, in Wales there was a four-to-one defeat for the Welsh Assembly proposals of that time. This perspective takes the view that if there must be a policy then the less radical it is the better.

Linked to this feeling, especially within some of the larger trade unions like the GMB and TGWU, is the view that taking a stand on any controversial policy, and especially one as potentially fissile as devolution, is a dangerous diversion from the main project of returning a Labour government. This cautious stance was exhibited in December 1994 in the submission the Wales TUC made to a Policy Commission which the Welsh Labour Party had established to review its devolution policy.

During the 1970s the Wales TUC consistently maintained a radical stance insisting that an Assembly should have wide-ranging legislative competence and strong industrial powers. Now, however, it backed away from anything sounding like a fully-fledged Parliament, suggesting that 'a local government model has many attractions'. It was necessary to recognise, the submission stated, that Wales 'represents a peripheral region both within the UK and within the European Union. As such Wales will continue to be a net recipient of regional transfers through the operation of regional policy and the tax and benefit system. As a net beneficiary of internal UK transfers, the Wales TUC does not think it appropriate for a Welsh Assembly to exercise powers over taxation...' (Wales TUC 1995)

This assertion ignores latest research suggesting that Wales is actually a net contributor to the British Exchequer. During 1994-5 this research calculates that the Treasury has a projected total gross income, by way of taxes and borrowing from Wales and from Brussels on account of Wales, of £12,586 million. Government projected spending in Wales for the same year, including pensions, social security payments, grants to local government and

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all other Central Government functions in Wales, amounted to a projected £12,555 million. Over the five years, 1990-95, Wales was calculated to have generated a £665 million surplus for the British Treasury. (Plaid Cymru 1994; see also Hill and Jones 1994)

The provenance of these figures, from Plaid Cymru, might give rise to scepticism elsewhere, and especially within the Labour Movement. Even so, the approach of the Wales TUC in the 1990s, as demonstrated by its latest submission on devolution, betrays a marked retreat from its position in the 1970s. Then, rather than just assuming a fiscal dependency, it would have been likely to have undertaken its own research to corroborate or otherwise the Plaid Cymru effort.

Part of the explanation is what can only be regarded as a kind of ageing sclerosis that has immobilised traditional Welsh Labourism for twenty years since the 1960s allowed a partial rejuvenation. This is the culture tied to one-party local government stretching across generations and the kind of régime that Rod Richards referred to so extravagantly in his remarks to **Barn**. It is a culture that is instinctively paternalistic, bred on patronage, and unused and unsympathetic to the democratic impulse. The kind of issues unleashed by devolution politics - the position of women, proportional representation, workers' control, and sustainable development as opposed to simple economic growth, to mention just four at random - are hardly music to its ears.

There is a further cautionary view, one partially linked to the others, and a curious blend of principle with sectarian pragmatism. This eschews talk of devolution as parochial and small-minded when compared with 'real' issues like poverty in the Third World, anarchy in the currency market, problems with the ozone layer, or diminishing reserves of oil. It connects with a nervous rejection of 'narrow nationalism' and a feeling that it is global rather than Welsh politics that really matter or, at least, are safer and easier to manage.

THE POINT OF DECISION

All this is the backcloth for the moment that Welsh Labour is reaching as it approaches its May 1995 annual conference where key decisions have to be taken about the exact form of a Welsh Assembly or Parliament, its powers, how it should be elected, and what it should be called. It explains why the Executive appointed a Constitutional Policy Commission two years ago to consider all the questions. In theory this was a gesture towards open politics:

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the promotion of a wide-ranging debate, an opening up to views from outside the Movement and so on. In practice, the six public hearings of the Commission that took place around Wales during the Autumn of 1994 were little advertised, very quiet, low key, and held on weekdays rather than during the evenings or at weekends. It was a process that seemed designed to minimise participation and suggests that the main purpose was to provide a democratic gloss for decisions that had already been taken hierarchically, long before. Labour's Conference will be presented with a document by the Commission to approve or reject. There will be little, if any, room for amendments, debate and real decision.

Underway has been a hesitant and generally reluctant testing of the waters to see how far the party can safely go at the same time as holding itself together. Already a few loose cannons are breaking cover. Llew Smith, the MP for Blaenau Gwent is one. In December 1994 he broke ranks from an emerging party consensus and called for a referendum: 'I did not join the Labour Party to follow the nationalist agenda,' he said. 'For a future Labour government in its first year of office to be concentrating its attention on constitutional issues like an Assembly is in my opinion an insult to the unemployed, the homeless, those on low pay and the victims of crime.' In January 1995 he issued a 16-page personal manifesto, **The Welsh Assembly: Why it Has No Place in Wales**. This concludes: 'I strongly believe it is wrong to assume that institutional changes are the answer when our most urgent task is to develop a Labour movement capable of introducing socialist ideas relevant to our communities. Nationalism and all its ugliness can then be defeated by ideas, by alternative ideas that will excite people and provide them with a more decent and dignified life and courage to put them into practice. Pandering to the separatist aspirations of the Nationalists will not succeed. It will only debase our ideas, destroying all that is fine and unique in the Labour movement.'

Llew Smith, however, is something of a lone voice, certainly in the Welsh Parliamentary Labour party where his opposition to devolution is seen as at one with his even more ardent opposition to the European Union and all its works. More generally MPs and party activists tend to be more concerned with presentation. What should an elected body for Wales be called? Whilst there is a view, probably growing, that an 'Assembly' suggests too much of it being a 'talking shop', for some a 'Parliament' smacks too much of firm, and separatist-sounding government.

In late 1994 Ron Davies, the Shadow Secretary of State for Wales and a key player, attempted to push the Liberal Democrat notion of a 'Senedd', as a

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March 1994:

Welsh Assembly	45	22	33
Independence within the European Union	37	36	27

October 1994:

Welsh Assembly	51	16	33
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Feb 1995:

Welsh Assembly	47	24	29
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The February 1995 poll asked those 'not opposed' to an Assembly - that is, those in favour and the Don't Knows - what kind they would prefer. Of those 'not opposed': 35% favoured an Assembly 'Independent of Westminster, in Europe'; 24% favoured an Assembly 'Under Westminster, but with tax and law-making powers'; 19% favoured an Assembly 'Under Westminster, but with limited powers'; 3% favoured a 'Consultative body only'; 19% were 'Don't knows'

Figures shown are percentages in rows.

Challenged in the television studios on the apparent discrepancy emerging between Labour's policies for Wales and Scotland, Ron Davies offered two explanations. Scotland, he said, was a different country with a different history and, most important of all, a different legal system which required its own legislative framework. There was a different scale of demand in Scotland which made tax raising powers more acceptable there. This led on to the second justification. If at this stage Labour in Wales went down the road of tax raising, the debate over its plans would focus purely on that commitment and deflect attention from the main underlying democratic argument for devolution.

Left to themselves there is little doubt that Labour's key policy makers in Wales would prefer to adopt a maximalist position on their emerging devolution scheme. However, they are being reined back by more cautious elements and, in the process, finding pragmatic arguments for doing so.

The one area where there may have to be a confrontation is over the method of election to the Assembly. Labour's consultative process has uncovered a deep hostility to any electoral system other than first-past-the-post. 'Why should we gratuitously hand seats to the Tories or the Nationalists,' is a sentiment widely reflected in the views given the Policy Commission by the Wales TUC and many constituency parties. Elsewhere in the party, and especially amongst those most in favour of devolution, there is an appreciation that Labour should not exploit its overwhelming electoral position. Instead it should adopt a self-consciously pluralist approach, most clearly demonstrated by agreeing a system of proportional representation for elections to the Assembly.

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A compromise appears to be emerging which, while acknowledging the arguments in favour of proportional representation, will fall short of proportionality. This is for a 100 member Assembly made up of two categories: (i) 80 members elected on a first-past-the post basis from two member constituencies whose boundaries will be the same as those of the 40 Westminster Parliamentary seats (at the next general election Wales is being allocated two extra seats); and (ii) 20 members, four for each of the five Welsh Euro-constituencies, elected by a proportional system (probably additional member) drawn from party lists. It is not clear whether the 20 additional members would be elected as a corrective to distortions amongst the 80 members elected first-past-the-post, or separately.

The matter is sensitive enough to warrant the Commission's report being drafted in two parts, the first dealing with issues around the establishment of the Assembly, its powers and so on, and the second dealing purely with the method of election. This will allow two separate votes to be taken at Labour's May conference, the first on the principle of devolution and the detailed scheme put forward, and the second on the electoral system to be adopted. This is aimed to circumvent opponents of devolution maximising their support by including others having a prior hostility to any concession on proportional representation.

It will be ironic if, in its eagerness not to be too far ahead of Welsh public opinion, Labour's Welsh policy makers fall too far behind. Opinion poll evidence suggests that those in favour of devolution tend to support a maximalist approach. Thus, in the latest February 1995 poll, of the 76 per cent 'not opposed' to an Assembly (made up of 47 per cent in favour and 29 per cent Don't Knows) 35 per cent favoured an Assembly 'independent of Westminster, in Europe'; and another 24 per cent an Assembly 'under Westminster, but with tax and law-making powers'. Only 19 per cent favoured an Assembly 'Under Westminster, but with limited powers', the closest to what appears will be Labour's policy (see Table 2).

There are signs that a younger, more radical and less sectarian generation is emerging in the Welsh constituency parties, a generation that reflects the New Labour politics of Blairism, committed to democracy from below rather than paternalism from above. However, they have yet to achieve key positions on sufficient a scale to ensure that their views are taken on board, especially where Welsh devolution is concerned. The danger for Labour is that it could saddle itself with a policy that will look dated, half-hearted and so difficult to campaign for at the next election.

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