

REVIEW: THE WALES YEARBOOK

Richard Parry

Denis Balsom (1997), **The Wales Yearbook 1998**, Cardiff: HTV, pb, £19.50, ISBN 0953128709, 512pp.

Just as no other part of the United Kingdom has a journal like **Scottish Affairs**, Wales is uniquely favoured by this handsome and authoritative reference work, compiled for many years by Denis Balsom of University College Aberystwyth and published with the support of local Independent Television contractor HTV. The latest edition includes full details of the 1997 General Election and devolution referendum in Wales. Apart from the merits of its content, the book is also splendidly designed and produced, with photographs and maps. Anyone with the slightest interest in Wales could misspend time browsing through the book's delineation of the rich institutional landscape that is Wales even before devolution.

At the heart of the book are profiles of parliamentary constituencies and MPs, with pictures and biographies of the MPs, results for 1992 and 1997, and a briefer electoral history going back to 1970. Local government is also covered in detail, with names and addresses of all local councillors. All this might be expected, but the book then has some admirable extensions of its scope. 100 pages are given over to Welsh quangos, with the names and occupations of all appointees; and there is finally a 1200-entry 'Directory of Welsh Organisations', with addresses, phone and fax numbers and sometimes e-mail addresses of, among others, all secondary schools and newspapers, trades unions, housing associations and pressure groups. Anyone who has tried to seek out this information for Scotland can imagine what an immense resource has been provided here.

The only obvious and unexpected gap is on the civil service in Wales: just a one-page organisation chart for the Welsh Office, with no biographies of officials other than the colourful Permanent Secretary, Rachel Lomax, and barely more than an address for other government departments. With quite a

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lot of biographical detail available on Whitehall officials in other publications, this would seem like a good avenue for development, as would some sort of bibliography of major Welsh Office publications. Ministers are there of course, though the 1998 edition loses the racy entry from last year 'Secretary of State - Assistant Private Secretary Ms Ff Jenkins'. Other possible expansions are into fuller socio-economic data and local electoral statistics, but it would be unreasonable to ask for much more in a 500-page text.

The 40 MPs are an interesting bunch. 14 of them are described as Welsh speakers, though unusually this includes none of the present Welsh Office ministerial team, for whom the correct phrase is 'enthusiastic Welsh Language learner'. Few MPs can match the exotic background of Lember Öpik (Lib Dem Montgomery) born in Northern Ireland of Estonian parents and previously based on Tyneside. Other notable expatriates are Peter Hain (Neath), now a Welsh Office minister, and Alan Howarth, the former Conservative MP parachuted into Newport East by Labour for 1997. No Labour MP has a longer unbroken parliamentary service than John Morris (Aberavon since 1959), Secretary of State for Wales in the 1970s and now back as Attorney General in the Blair government. As in Scotland, there are now no Conservatives, with the party losing its six MPs in 1997 and dropping below 20% of the vote. The 34 Labour MPs, backed by a higher share of the vote than Labour gets in Scotland (55% in 1997) are in two compact groups in south and north-east Wales and matched by four Plaid Cymru MPs in the rural west and two Liberal Democrats in the rural east. The biographies of MPs are comprehensive and include the occasional arresting fact, such as that Plaid Cymru leader Dafydd Wigley was born in Derby.

The desirability of competence in the Welsh language is a divisive issue in a nation where 19% of the population speak the language but over 60% in Gwynedd in the North West. Balsom points out in his introduction that Wales divides into three not two identities: the Welsh speaking heartland; 'British Wales' in the northeast, the border areas and the southern coast; and 'Welsh Wales', the former coalfields of South Wales where Welsh-speaking has much declined - typically as the language was not passed on two or three generations back - but there is still a strong Welsh identification and Plaid Cymru is the main, though weak, opposition to Labour. The bare majority for devolution (50.3% being both the yes vote and the turnout) was an alliance of west and inland south Wales, which just outweighed the forces of 'British Wales' who have been so dubious about the policy. The book also notes that the swing in favour of devolution between 1979 and 1997 was precisely the same in Wales as in Scotland (15%). The Welsh devolution referendum - with the BBC declaring the no side the victors and yes supporters tearing up

their betting slips before Carmarthen voters came to their rescue - was an exciting reminder that profound consequences can turn on narrow margins.

Devolution, even to an Assembly without taxation or legislative powers, does offer scope for building up a Welsh national identity and curbing the 'quango state' that has so dominated Welsh government. The Secretary of State makes over 700 appointments and there is the full panoply of health trusts, education funding councils and training councils. Given that proficiency in Welsh is a helpful attribute for some appointments, the eligible pool must at times be small and amount to a self-perpetuating élite. Reading the fascinating pages on quangos, photographs of familiar faces pop out - cricketers Ossie Wheatley and Tony Lewis in the chair at the Sports Council and Tourist Board respectively, Ffion's father Emyr Jenkins as Chief Executive of the Arts Council, and former Plaid Cymru MP Dafydd Elis Thomas, now in the House of Lords and chairing the Welsh Language Board. Some quango members live outside Wales in a way that would be unusual in the Scottish context.

Since the 1960s Wales has caught up much of the gap with Scotland in terms of administrative devolution, but still lacks much of the coherence of a nation. Its north-east and south-east borders are particularly permeable. Plaid Cymru remains stuck at about 10% of the vote and its MPs secure their position by being defenders of the Welsh-speaking areas. The one clear consequence of devolution is that it removes the likelihood of the Conservatives administering Wales: Labour might get an absolute majority of seats on the PR system, but a coalition might be more usual - 1997 was the first election since 1970 where Labour had got more than 50% of the Welsh vote. Beyond that, the process of nation-building is going to be slow. Welsh identity has more of the 'Irish as a state of mind' concept found in the Northern Ireland Peace agreement than of the legal, historical and boundary-defined position in Scotland. Even with the Welsh Assembly in place, the basic political dynamic in Britain is likely to be Scotland lined up opposite 'England and Wales' rather than the more balanced devolutionary pattern envisaged in Labour's constitutional strategy.

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