

REVIEW: WALES AFTER DEVOLUTION

Richard Parry

John Osmond ed, **The National Assembly Agenda**, Cardiff, Institute of Welsh Affairs 1998, pb, £19.95, ISBN 1 871726 433, pp vi + 410.

David Dunkerley and Andrew Thompson eds, **Wales Today**, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, hb £25.00 ISBN 0 7083 1521 6, pb 13.99, ISBN 0 7083 1544 5, pp xvi + 326.

There is a great demand for the 'book of devolution' and Wales has been challenging Scotland in the production of timely material like these two titles. This is especially true of **The National Assembly Agenda**, a most handsomely produced compendium of facts and opinion published in late 1998. Part one is on 'Operating the National Assembly' - its funding, legislative responsibility, language policy and media arrangements. There is a strong team of authors for this part, who understand parliamentary and civil service procedures. Although the material might seem to be obsolete after the Assembly elections in 1999 the careful detail in this section is of lasting value. Much the same is true of the third part on 'Relationships', which covers the regional structure of Wales and links within the United Kingdom and beyond. In contrast, the second section on 'Policy Processes and Options' might seem less ephemeral, but its recital of needs and challenges in the various policy areas has the air of special pleading by authors over-committed to their fields. The book as a whole is a tribute to the way that its editor, John Osmond, has built up the Institute of Welsh Affairs as focus for analysis of the emerging Welsh political system.

Wales Today is a more conventional book of socio-economic commentary, edited by sociologists at the University of Glamorgan and with a slightly old-fashioned feel to its presentation. Chapters cover the economy, the language, the social services, and issues like homelessness and racism. A chapter on Politics takes in the events of 1999 and the results of the elections. The book assembles a solid body of material and will be very useful for educational

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and research purposes. There are unexpected pleasures in the chapters by John Aitchison and Harold Carter on the Welsh language (whose purity is slipping under the impact of 'semi-speakers') and Steve Blandford on the Arts (and the impact of pop groups like Catatonia and the Manic Street Preachers). Generally, though, the book doesn't sparkle ('a notable year for women in Wales was 1975; the year in which the Equal Pay Act and Sex Discrimination Act came into force') and leaves little sense of what the characteristics described should imply for the political identity of the nation.

The National Assembly is not just a new political institution but the crucible for the forging of a national identity. Wales's axes had been resolutely east-west as transport links, economic dependencies, cultural forces and even the direction of television aerials drag citizens towards adjacent parts of England. The language issue had been divisive; a wider general familiarity with Welsh through its teaching in schools, but the dilution of the identity of Welsh-speaking areas by monoglot immigrants. The political networks were incestuous and run through public appointments and consultation procedures. In all of these respects Wales's devolutionary potential fell far short of Scotland's, and the bare 50% referendum majority for the proposals was one of the chanciest outcomes in recent British political history. Low turnouts for both the referendum and the Assembly elections cast doubt on the engagement of many Welsh voters with their new institutions.

And yet the National Assembly does put in place the political component of the Welsh national project of the twentieth century. Sensationally, Labour was run close by the newly bilingual Plaid Cymru-the Party of Wales, their respective shares of the second vote being 35% and 31%. Denied an overall majority, Labour ran a minority administration, with tacit Plaid Cymru support on occasion, until the formal arrangement with the Liberal Democrats in autumn 2000. The 60 Assembly members, shoehorned into a tiny debating chamber in their temporary headquarters in Cardiff Bay, call one another by their first names and defer to their linguistic preferences. Civil servants work for the National Assembly itself, not a legally separate executive, and as the 'ministers' (the Assembly secretaries) sit on subject committees the officials operate in a less adversarial context than in Scotland. This rather cosy assembly owes something to its constitutional position, being unable to pass primary legislation, but also something to its Welshness - the idea of 'gwerin' or hospitable community (discussed with sensitivity by Charlotte Williams in **Wales Today**). Scotland has a harsher edge to its politics that many have found uncomfortable in the first year of the Parliament; perhaps Wales, the latecomer in British territorial politics, has lessons to offer.

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November 2000