

ON PROCESS, EVENTS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE POLITICS OF WELSH DEVOLUTION

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Former Secretary of State for Wales, Ron Davies, may have understood all along that 'devolution is a process not an event' (Davies 1999). The same cannot be said for other senior members of his own party. Rather it appears that many of the leading figures in the first Blair administration were unaware of how radical the constitutional reforms that they were initiating really were. Nowhere is this better evidenced, of course, than in the Labour leadership's serial mishandling of successive battles for the Labour leadership in Wales. Indeed the conduct of the Prime Minister and his closest advisers during these battles – the first involving Davies, the second following his resignation, and the third in effect a palace coup to replace a candidate foisted on an unwilling Welsh party by Downing Street – suggests not only that they were less than fully cognisant of the dynamics that were being unleashed by devolution, but, moreover, that they have been rather slow on the uptake.

In the light of the difficulties encountered during the (ongoing) reordering of relationships between the devolved territories and the Whitehall/Westminster nexus, there has been much talk of 'unintended consequences'. This is

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National identity and the Politics of Welsh Devolution

especially so in Wales. This no doubt is in part a reflection of the fact that there was there almost no popular debate in Wales about the implications of devolution prior to the 1997 UK general election, and, as such, there was much confusion about the consequences of devolution, intended or otherwise. In addition, while the available evidence clearly suggests that popular support for devolution has greatly increased since the wafer-thin referendum majority (on which see Paterson (forthcoming)), there remains a significant rump of anti-devolution opinion. Most prominent among the latter, perhaps, are Welsh Labour MPs, a group for many of whom the 'unintended consequence' trope serves merely to confirm their earlier prophecies of doom.

This article focuses on one of the most interesting and potentially significant of those 'unintended consequences' of Welsh devolution, namely the new prominence and role that national identity has acquired in Welsh politics. This is highlighted through an examination of the relationship between the complex patterns of national identity that exist in Wales and public support for – and participation in – the devolution process. While less dramatic than leadership battles and the stuff of daily headlines, this relationship, with all its manifold ramifications, will almost certainly prove to be of greater consequence in the longer term. In this regard it is striking to note the contradiction that exists between the theory and practice – or better, between the justification and practice – of Welsh devolution, at least as it pertains to national identity. For while national identity played a very limited role in the official case for devolution, as this paper will seek to demonstrate the reality is that national identity has been one of the most significant determinants in influencing how members of the Welsh electorate have viewed the reforms to their country's political system. This in turn has meant that, since the first election to the National Assembly for Wales, national identity has begun to play a different and far more prominent role Welsh political life. The greater political salience of national identity in Welsh politics looks set to persist into the future with unforeseen, perhaps unforeseeable – and certainly unintended – consequences.

The paper proceeds by first examining the justification provided for devolution in Wales by its Labour sponsors, in the process highlighting the complex attitudes towards national identity in Wales displayed by the two most politically significant forces in the pro-devolution camp, namely the Wales Labour Party and Plaid Cymru. Following this, we briefly review the evidence that suggests that, in practice, national identity was a key factor in determining both the Referendum vote and voting behaviour in the 1999 National Assembly election. The paper concludes with a discussion of the

Scottish Affairs

new prominence accorded to Welsh national identity in the country's political life.

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND JUSTIFICATION

As a review of the relevant position documents, manifestos and speeches demonstrates, national identity did not play a significant part in the discourse that characterised the process whereby devolution gradually re-emerged onto the political agenda in Wales, from around 1992 onwards, up to and including the first National Assembly election in May 1999 (the most significant statements are Wales Labour Party (1993, 1994, 1995 and 1996) and Welsh Office (1997); see also Wyn Jones and Lewis (1998, 1999) and Morgan and Mungham (2000)). For its champions in the Labour party in Wales, devolution was about making the governmental process more 'open', more 'accountable' and more 'efficient'. Or, to use a phrase that since 1997 has become ubiquitous in Welsh politics, devolution was all about 'inclusiveness' (on the 'cult of inclusiveness' see Chaney and Fevre (2001)). Devolution would ensure proper scrutiny of the so-called 'quango state' that, it was argued, had developed in Wales under successive Conservative administration (for influential statements see Osmond (1992, 1995)). Devolution would bridge the 'democratic deficit'. It would create a conduit whereby the views of those who had felt marginalized during the Thatcher and Major years – which, given the long-standing anti-Conservative tradition in Wales, was de facto assumed to include most of the Welsh population – could be heard. This would in turn encourage greater 'participation' in the political process.

To the extent that devolution for Wales was placed in a broader all-UK context, it was seen as a part of a wider package of constitutional reform that would 'modernize' the UK state (for a characteristically caustic assessment of the Labour party's rhetorical emphasis on the 'new' and the 'modern' see Nairn (2000)). So, for example, in the pre-referendum white paper **A Voice for Wales** we find the following statement:

[t]he Government is committed to establishing a new, more inclusive and participative democracy in Britain. Its proposals for a Welsh Assembly reflect these aims. An Assembly – which will work in partnership with local authorities and other public bodies in Wales, with the voluntary sector, with central government in Whitehall and with European institutions – will be at the heart of that new democracy.
(Welsh Office 1997, p.3)

National identity and the Politics of Welsh Devolution

Note once again the emphasis on reforming the process of government. The implications of devolving power to a national territory within the UK were not mentioned let alone considered.

The stated purpose of devolution was to produce better government rather than, say, give 'proper' constitutional recognition to Welsh nationhood. In this regard, as indeed in many others, the parallels with the earlier attempt to establish a devolved Assembly in the 1970s were striking. Then devolution had been presented as a means by which so-called 'overload' at Westminster could be reduced and by which the local government reforms of the early 1970s could be completed. Devolution was about bringing government closer to the people, making it more accountable and, hence, more legitimate (Foulkes, Jones and Wilford 1983). Again, very few attempts were made to bring into play any themes that might be termed 'nationalist' – be it nationalist with either a small or a large 'n'.

Why was this the case? After all it requires no great insight to suggest that arguments suggesting that (to caricature only slightly) 'those dedicated politicians in Westminster are overworked and another layer of elected politicians is needed to lessen their workload' are unlikely to generate widespread affective appeal. Nor do arguments for constitutional reform that point to apparently abstract concerns such as lack of transparency, accountability or openness produce much by way of popular resonance. Rather these arguments are all too easily countered by other more populist arguments. So, for example, even the very poorly organised No campaign in the 1997 devolution referendum in Wales was able to cause great discomfort to pro-devolution campaigners by pointing to the number of hip-replacement operations that could be conducted with the money saved by not employing 'more' politicians and civil servants in a devolved Assembly. This argument was almost certainly as disingenuous as it was simplistic. Nonetheless, in crude political terms, it hit home. Weren't devolutionists therefore guilty of denying themselves a potentially key political advantage in their eschewal of the 'national' or 'patriotic' card in pursuing their aims? Evidence abounds as to the potential impact of such themes. In the general election campaign only a few months prior to the referendum, Labour had deliberately played on (British) nationalistic/patriotic themes. There was little subtlety involved in this: the party's first election poster was a poster of a Union-Jack-clad bulldog. However, the campaign was widely credited as having neutralised the Conservatives' own attempts to wrap themselves in the flag and cast their opponents as a party likely to play fast and loose with the 'national interest' and the unity of the United Kingdom. In the context of 'selling' devolution, however, things were different.

Scottish Affairs

The reasons why nationhood was not more regularly invoked by pro-devolution campaigners – that it was not, to use contemporary political parlance, part of their 'central narrative' – reflects the complex and contested nature of national identity in Wales, and the various manifestations of this reality in the country's political culture. The national identity of Wales's population is far from homogeneous. A majority feel themselves to be both Welsh and British, but in degrees that vary not only from person to person, but also from context to context. However substantial minorities feel themselves to have either an exclusively Welsh identity, or a national identity that is exclusively British. The situation is rendered even more complicated by the fact that around a fifth of the population speak Welsh, which, it has been argued, is associated with an intensification of (Welsh) national sentiment (Balsom, Madgwick and Van Mechelen 1984). A further element in this convoluted equation is that another substantial minority of those who reside in Wales – around one quarter – were born elsewhere, mostly in England. And, of course, all of this must be placed into the context of Wales's often uneasy and always unequal relationship with its English/British neighbour to the east (Paterson and Wyn Jones 1999). Raymond Williams's claim that the Welsh have 'some of the most radical identity confusions of any modern people' (Williams 1990, p.66) may be regarded as somewhat overstated if taken literally. Nonetheless, it contains an important grain of truth. The complex and often rather neurotic ways in which 'the Welsh' have thought of themselves has provided a deep seam which the country's writers have worked for many centuries (Jones 1998; Hunter 2000). But the very tensions, contradictions and neuroses that have proven so productive of literature creates treacherous terrain for politicians. Quite simply, to attempt to play the Welsh 'national' card in the context of devolution would be to court too many potential difficulties. This was a point recognised in their different ways by both the main players in the pro-devolution camp, namely the Wales Labour Party and Plaid Cymru.

The Wales Labour Party position

As the long-standing hegemonic force in Welsh politics, it is not surprising that the Wales Labour Party itself represents a microcosm of the problematic relationship of the Welsh to national identity. Historians of the party have long recognised the existence of two distinct views within it on the question of national identity and its implications. Alluding to the title of a famous address delivered by Keir Hardie when he was MP for Merthyr Tudful, K.O. Morgan has characterised this as a division between the 'the red dragon and the red flag' (Morgan 1988): between those, on the one hand, who regard Welsh nationhood as a fact with significant implications in terms of

National identity and the Politics of Welsh Devolution

organisation, policies, and so on; and those, on the other hand, who are relatively indifferent or even hostile to claims to Welsh nationhood and who instead prioritise the claims of 'international socialism'. But while his characterisation of the latter group is certainly consistent with the self-image of many of those who fall within it, it is of questionable analytical utility. There is no reason to believe that those on the 'nationalist' wing have been less internationally-minded than the self-proclaimed internationalists. So for example, Jim Griffiths, the first Secretary of State for Wales and a figure that Morgan identifies as among those in the party most sympathetic to the claims of Wales, was a notably progressive Colonial Secretary in the Attlee government (Smith 1978). Moreover it is not clear that internationalist rhetoric, however strident, has been accompanied by any meaningful policy commitments.¹ Rather, those whom Morgan views as devotees of the 'red flag' have been ardently unionist in their outlook (for one of the most detailed statements of their position on devolution see Labour No Assembly Campaign Wales (1979)). The division in the Labour party is therefore most usefully characterised as a division between Welsh nationalism and British unionism, the latter being, of course, in itself a form of British nationalism.

The attempts of the Labour administration in the 1970s to establish a Welsh Assembly were effectively undermined by a rebellious group of unionist MPs. While many of those who were then prominently opposed to devolution had departed the political stage by the time, in the early 1990s, that a new generation of devolutionists had begun to press their case, opposition to the principle was still deeply entrenched within the party. As a result, proponents of devolution had to tread carefully. Their task was undoubtedly greatly aided by the fact that much of impetus to re-engage with the issue of devolution was being generated beyond the borders of Wales – initially by advocates of English regionalism, and subsequently, and most powerfully, by the situation in Scotland (for an extended discussion see Wyn Jones and Lewis (1998); also Morgan and Mungham (2000)). Nonetheless, it was vital that pro-devolution rhetoric focus, as we have seen, on the process of government and the purported material benefits of creating an all-Wales tier of elected government, rather than on claims concerning nationhood. To do otherwise would be to risk enraging unionists for whom any hint of

¹ So, for example, Neil Kinnock, one of the most passionate and effective opponents of devolution in the 1970s, was at that time also ardently anti-European. Interestingly, while his position on the European Union has subsequently undergone a complete transformation, there is no evidence of a similar volte face in his views on devolution

Scottish Affairs

'appeasing nationalism' was anathema. This in turn would gravely threaten any prospect of securing change.

It is, of course, difficult to know the extent to which the pro-devolutionists stress on process and instrumentality rather than on overtly national-identity-related themes was the result of some self-denying ordinance. One interpretation is that it was simply a reflection of how they themselves saw the case for reform. Given, however, the alacrity with which pro-devolution figures in the Labour party began to seize on nationalist themes once the referendum had passed (see below), it seems plausible to suggest that, consciously or not, some of them had been tailoring their language in the preceding period.

The Plaid Cymru position

The question of national identity in Wales does not give rise to the same internal difficulties and tensions within Plaid Cymru, the Party of Wales, as it evidently does within the Wales Labour party.² The party's view of the nature of Welsh national identity has been settled since its foundation in 1925 (see Wyn Jones (1999, 2000)), while its members regard the political relevance of that identity as simply axiomatic. That said, no one has been more aware of the pitfalls of making claims on explicitly (Welsh) national grounds in the Welsh context than the Welsh nationalists themselves. It is striking in this regard to consider their specific role in the run-up to the 1997 devolution referendum. The important point to note here is that because of the enduring legacy of the widespread hostility that Welsh nationalism had traditionally engendered beyond its core support, allied to the party's desire to do nothing that would weaken the pro-devolution vote, Plaid Cymru chose not to play a prominent public role in the 1997 referendum campaign.³ So while the party

² Bradbury (2001, p.27) provides striking evidence of the consensus among Plaid Cymru candidates in the National Assembly election on the question of their own personal sense of national identity. An overwhelming majority (85%) regarded themselves as having an exclusively Welsh identity.

³ It should be noted that the 1979 Welsh Election Survey showed the Welsh electorate to be even more hostile to Plaid Cymru than they were to the Conservatives. It was only following the 1997 referendum that it became clear that this situation had changed dramatically during the intervening years (Evans and Trystan 1999, p.103). Unfortunately no election surveys were conducted in Wales between 1979 and the referendum, and as Plaid Cymru made no dramatic electoral breakthroughs during those years either, there is little hard evidence as to how, when or why this change came about.

National identity and the Politics of Welsh Devolution

played a crucial backroom role by very effectively mobilising its members to provide much of the organisational underpinning for the 'Yes' campaign, it was nonetheless content to stand aside and allow the Labour leadership in Wales, and the non-party figures involved in the 'Yes for Wales' campaign, to be its public face (see McCrone and Lewis (1999); for a somewhat self-centred account of the campaign from a prominent figure in the Yes campaign see Andrews (1999)). That is, even had it been so minded to make the case for devolution in 'nationalist' terms, Plaid Cymru deliberately abstained from the opportunity to do so proffered by the referendum.

In summary, therefore, Welsh national identity did not play a prominent role in pro-devolution pre-referendum rhetoric; it was not an important element in the justification given for instigating such far reaching constitutional change. This silence speaks eloquently to the particular complex nature of national identity in the Welsh context, and the ways that this complexity is refracted through the institutions of its political society, and specifically the political parties. But, as is demonstrated in the next section, national identity is key to the politics of the referendum itself, as well as the first election to the National Assembly for Wales.

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND PRACTICE

That national identity was a crucial factor in determining attitudes in the 1997 referendum on devolution has now been well established. For the purposes of this analysis I shall content myself with reproducing a simple frequency table (Table 1) from data taken from the 1997 Welsh Referendum Survey (readers interested in formal statistical proofs are directed to Wyn Jones and Trystan (1999) and Evans and Trystan (1999)).⁴ This plots voting behaviour against national identity as measured by the so-called Moreno scale. This scale has been designed to capture situations, such as that which exists in Wales, where many individuals have overlapping senses of national identity, in our case, feeling both Welsh and British. Respondents are asked to place themselves on a spectrum:

Welsh not British

⁴ *The 1997 Welsh Referendum Survey was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and undertaken in conjunction between staff at the Department of International Politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and the Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends (CREST). Full technical details of the survey can be found in Thomson and Taylor 1999.*

Scottish Affairs

More Welsh than British
Equally Welsh and British
More British than Welsh
British not Welsh

One trend that is strikingly apparent when we consider the data (Table 1) is that those towards the Welsh end of the spectrum (that is those identifying themselves as Welsh not British and More Welsh than British) were significantly more likely to support devolution than those who felt equally Welsh and British or subscribed to a more or exclusively British identity. Conversely, those towards the more British end of the spectrum were significantly more likely to be opposed. Moreover, there are indications of a relationship between national identity and turnout, with respondents towards the Welsh end of the spectrum also more likely to vote.

Table 1
National Identity and Referendum Vote

	Yes %	No %	Did not vote %	N
Welsh not British	43**	23**	34	113
More Welsh than British	43**	25	31**	166
Equally Welsh and British	25	34	41	225
More British than Welsh	16**	37	46	67
British not Welsh	13**	45*	42	82

N = 653

* denotes significance at the 0.05 level

** denotes significance at the 0.01 level

The 26 respondents who gave other answers to the Moreno question have been excluded from this table.

These data demonstrate that national identity was bound up with perceptions of devolution among the Welsh electorate. Indeed the evidence strongly suggests that national identity and party identification (which is itself related to national identity, see Wyn Jones and Trystan (1999)) were the key influences on voting behaviour. It was these factors rather than some

National identity and the Politics of Welsh Devolution

commitment to 'inclusivity' or modernised government per se that proved to be decisive.

As an analysis of the first election to the National Assembly for Wales in 1999 makes clear, the significance of national identity for devolutionary politics did not end with the referendum. Table 2 is another simple frequency table plotting voting behaviour in the National Assembly election against national identity using data from the 1999 Welsh National Assembly Election Survey (again readers interested in a detailed statistical analysis are directed elsewhere, this time to Wyn Jones and Trystan (2000)).⁵ The patterns thrown up here are perhaps not as stark and straightforward as was the case with the referendum – which is not unexpected given that there are more variables involved – but they are nonetheless significant. Let us turn first to the relationship between national identity and turnout. In the wake of the opposition to devolution among those with a weak or nonexistent sense of Welsh national identity apparent at the time of the referendum, some worry was expressed that the new devolved body would lack legitimacy among this group (Wyn Jones and Lewis 1999). This lack of legitimacy might be manifested by their lack of participation in subsequent Assembly elections. In as much as we find that respondents with an exclusively British sense of identity were significantly less likely to vote than those whose sense of identity contains some Welsh sentiment, the findings from 1999 might be said to provide some evidence in support of this thesis. However, of arguably greater significance is that turnout was relatively low across the board in the National Assembly election. Detailed analysis has suggested that this was a reflection a general alienation from the political processes rather than a reflection of antipathy towards the Assembly itself among a particular group of the electorate (Wyn Jones and Trystan 2001a). Nonetheless, the issue of the participation in post-devolution politics in Wales of those who feel no sense of Welsh national identity should clearly remain on the intellectual agenda of future analysts of Welsh politics.

But while the evidence concerning the relationship between national identity and turnout may be regarded as somewhat ambiguous, national identity was clearly implicated in the voting decisions of those electors who actually went to the polls. The Labour party was the only party that drew support

⁵ *The 1999 Welsh Assembly Election Survey was funded by the ESRC (grant number R000238070) and co-directed by the author and Professor Anthony Heath of the University of Oxford. Fieldwork for the survey was undertaken in the immediate aftermath of the Assembly Election by the National Centre for Social Research.*

Scottish Affairs

proportionally from across the identity spectrum (with the partial exception of those with exclusively British national identity among whom Labour scored less well). All the others parties drew their support disproportionately from some part of the spectrum. Plaid Cymru, perhaps unsurprisingly, drew its support disproportionately from those respondents with an exclusively or predominantly Welsh national identity, and performed relatively poorly among those who felt equally Welsh and British and those who identified themselves as predominantly or exclusively British. This was the mirror image of the Conservatives' performance, while the Liberal Democrats also performed best among those respondents towards the British end of the identity spectrum. Even if it did not feature in pre-referendum justification, national identity matters in the practice of post-devolution politics in Wales. The remainder of this article argue that it is likely to continue mattering in future given the particularities and peculiarities of the Welsh situation.

Table 2

National Identity and Voting Behaviour in the 1999 National Assembly Election

	Did not vote %	Con %	Labour %	Liberal Democrat %	Plaid Cymru %	N
Welsh not British	41	4**	22	5	28**	196
More Welsh than British	43	4**	22	5	27**	223
Equally Welsh and British	44	12**	24	8	13**	429
More British than Welsh	47	8	23	14*	8**	91
British not Welsh	54*	13*	14*	13**	6**	160
Overall	45	9	22	8	17	1099

The data reproduced here are for the constituency vote. The same patterns apply for regional list vote as well and so data for this will not be reported here.

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND POST-DEVOLUTION POLITICS

As has already been established, national identity in Wales is both contested and, in many ways, contentious. When this is taken in conjunction with the fact (as underlined by Table 3) that none of the various identity groups is overwhelmingly dominant in numerical terms, and that national identity is mutually implicated in complex ways with other markers such as class and age (Wyn Jones and Trystan 1999), it is clear that all the political parties in Wales face very serious challenges in the years ahead. The nature of the challenges that the parties face are easily summarised even if solutions are less apparent. For the Labour Party, long the hegemonic force in Welsh politics, the challenge is to both continue to draw support from across the range of identity groups and fight off the strong challenge it clearly faces from Plaid Cymru among those electors towards the Welsh end of the identity spectrum (Table 2). For the other three parties, the challenge is to increase their votes from members of those identity groups among whom they currently fare badly. It is already apparent that at least some of the parties are aware of the need to adapt accordingly in the post-devolutionary situation.

Table 3

Proportion of Respondents in Moreno National Identity Groups

	1997 %	1999 %
Welsh not British	16	17
More Welsh than British	25	19
Equally Welsh and British	33	37
More British than Welsh	10	8
British not Welsh	12	14
Others	4	6
N	686	1241

Scottish Affairs

Sources: 1997 Welsh Referendum Survey; 1999 Welsh Assembly Election Survey.⁶

The first party to self-consciously attempt to change to face the new context was Plaid Cymru. In 1998 the party formally adopted a bilingual name 'Plaid Cymru – The Party of Wales'. Within the party itself this was viewed as an important symbolic gesture designed to extend the party's support beyond its largely Welsh-speaking core vote to English speakers, especially Welsh-identifying English speakers in the south Wales valleys (McAllister 2001). In

⁶ Readers are cautioned against investing too much significance to the changes apparent here between 1997 and 1999. As has already been mentioned, there is a paucity of social science data on Wales before 1997 and it would be unwise to posit trends on the basis of only two sets of comparable data. As such, these figures should simply be seen as giving a broad indication of the proportions involved. That said, as more data become available in subsequent years, analysts will clearly be interested to investigate any trends do become apparent. One way of interpreting Table 3 is to count all of those respondents who regard themselves as both Welsh and British (in varying degrees) as one identity group. Thus Table 3 might be modified as follows:

	1997	1999
Exclusively Welsh %	16	17
Both Welsh and British %	68	64
Exclusively British %	12	14

This leaves those with an overlapping sense of national identity in a clear majority. But while this is clearly a logical way of proceeding, the evidence in Table 2 suggests that in terms of political behaviour, it is more plausible to differentiate between those who view themselves as exclusively or primarily Welsh; those who view themselves as equally Welsh and British; and, those who view themselves as exclusively or primarily British. This would lead to the following reading of Table 3 – again a situation where no group has overwhelming dominance:

	1997	1999
Exclusively or primarily Welsh %	40	36
Equally Welsh and British %	33	37
Exclusively or primarily British %	23	22

But rather than charge the Moreno model with overcomplicating the situation in Wales, I would argue that a more plausible concern is that the view it generates is too simplistic. For not only do many people in Wales in feel overlapping senses of national identity, but the intensity of the different elements varies over time, and from context to context in a way that elides any simple analysis – or quantification. Nonetheless, the question does represent an invaluable starting point for thinking about the complexities of the issues involved.

National identity and the Politics of Welsh Devolution

as much as the 1999 National Assembly election was easily the best overall result in the party's history, and that, in particular, it scored stunning victories in Labour's valleys heartlands, Plaid Cymru was clearly spectacularly successful in extending its appeal. On the basis of the available evidence it is difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate the specific impact of gestures like the name-change in securing that result. However, if imitation is indeed the sincerest form of flattery, then Labour's subsequent attempt to rebrand itself as 'the true party of Wales' (see below) strongly suggest that Plaid's main opponent believes that its change was significant.

In terms of its positioning on national identity, the Wales Labour Party (to give that organisation its correct name) has attempted to strike two chords. Party leaders have repeatedly stressed the validity of dual identity, arguing not only that Welshness and Britishness are in essential harmony, but furthermore that devolution actually gives political expression to the reality of dual identity as experienced in Wales. The mantra 'proud to be Welsh, proud to be British' has become a standard rhetorical trope in the party's public pronouncements. But in addition, and in particular in the wake of the party's disappointing showing in the 1999 National Assembly election, concerted efforts have been made to create a stronger Welsh image, and hence to court Welsh identifying voters. The party's first leader in the National Assembly, Alun Michael, attempted to strike a public tone that was distinctly, and distinctively, 'nationalist'. His efforts culminated in two striking speeches delivered just prior to his enforced resignation. In November 1999, in a lecture delivered in Aberystwyth that was given extensive media coverage and reprinted in full in the tabloid **Welsh Mirror**, Michael sought to construct the genealogy of a distinctly Welsh Labour tradition (Michael 2000).⁷ In a subsequent speech delivered in Machynlleth on the 21 January 2000, the First Secretary even associated Labour with the legacy of the last great Welsh rebellion against the English led by Owain Glyndwr!

Alun Michael's credibility in making these 'nationalist' noises was somewhat undermined by the widespread perception that he was Tony Blair's placeman in Wales (Mungham 2001).⁸ Indeed, it is almost certainly the case that in

⁷ *In this speech Michael seems to draw a great deal on an earlier statement by Ron Davies (Davies 1999), made when the latter had been cast into the political wilderness following his resignation from the post of Secretary of State for Wales.*

⁸ *Tony Blair has subsequently admitted his mistake in insisting that Michael become his party's first leader in the National Assembly. See **The Guardian** 10 April 2000.*

Scottish Affairs

trying to carve out a more 'Welsh' image in his public pronouncements, Michael was as much concerned with creating a new image for himself as he was with re-positioning the Wales Labour Party. Notwithstanding this, since his resignation and replacement by Rhodri Morgan as First Secretary – later First Minister⁹ – Labour have redoubled their efforts to generate a more 'Welsh' image. In a move already alluded to, at the party's annual conference in Wales in March 2000, on a stage bedecked in red, green and white, the party was rebranded as 'Welsh Labour'. In a clear reference to Plaid Cymru, the phrase 'the true Party of Wales' has subsequently appeared prominently on party pronouncements and publications (see, for example, the party's website at www.waleslabourparty.org.uk/).

The difficulty that Labour faces in developing a distinct image in Wales is that the nature of the media in Wales, and indeed the very limited powers of the Assembly, mean that the shadow cast by the UK level is particularly long (see Williams 2000). Moreover, and relatedly, the Welsh party has also to contend with the fact that the attitudes of UK level leaders towards British national identity are ambiguous and contradictory. Space precludes a detailed analysis here, but it is important to note some of the main themes that have emerged from various public statements, not least because they clearly have very different implications for the relationship between devolution and national identity in Wales.

The language of nation and national identity, or of what Michael Billig has termed 'banal nationalism', is a commonplace in the rhetoric of politicians in all developed states (Billig 1995). What makes the first Blair administration so interesting is the amount of explicit attention devoted to the issue of national identity in the public pronouncement of its leading figures. Indeed there can scarcely be any UK government that has devoted quite so much explicit attention to the question of what it means to be British (see, for example, Blair (2000a, 2000b); Brown (1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 2000, 2001); Straw (2000); Cook (2001); by way of comparison, Conservative views are expounded in Hague (1998, 1999); Willets (1998)). It may be taken as a

⁹ *Following the announcement on the 5 October 2000 of a coalition agreement between Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the National Assembly, Rhodri Morgan has changed his title from First Secretary to First Minister. Cabinet members are now also known as Ministers rather than Secretaries. The justification for this change, which has little or no basis in the relevant legislation, was an assertion that the previous nomenclature led to confusion between the role of civil servants and politicians. Perhaps more to the point, however, is that the change brings Wales into line with Scotland (and Northern Ireland).*

National identity and the Politics of Welsh Devolution

token of the administration's concern and interest that in December 1999 the historian Linda Colley – author of the acclaimed study **Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837** (1994) – delivered a 'Millennium lecture' before an invited audience in 10 Downing Street on the subject 'Britishness in the 21st Century' (Colley 1999). Characteristically, in November 2000, the government even extended the brief of a junior minister, Michael Wills, to include ensuring that its views on national identity were effectively communicated – a role that was swiftly dubbed as the 'patriotism envoy' (**Daily Telegraph**, 26 November 2000).¹⁰ But there is, of course, no necessary connection between the amount of attention that is lavished on any given issue and the clarity with which it is apprehended. And so it is that while all those senior figures in the Labour party who have mused on British national identity are equally adamant that their actions, and in particular devolution, has strengthened 'it', there is, I would argue, a degree of confusion as to the nature of that which has allegedly been so enhanced.

At least two conceptualisations of British national identity have featured in recent Labour party rhetoric: a formulation that stresses national identities in the plural; and another, essentially unitary, version. The pluralist conception views British national identity as a multinational identity. It is an argument that has been made most cogently perhaps by the Chancellor Gordon Brown (Brown 1992, 1999a, 1999b).¹¹ But it is also the position at the heart of Tony Blair's most sustained argument concerning national identity, namely a speech delivered on the 28 March 2000 (Blair 2000a; for another statement of this position see also Straw (2000)). This view of Britishness as a multinational phenomenon is, of course, one that is consistent with devolution. For in the context of a multi-national state, devolved institutions such as the National Assembly for Wales 'just give long held feelings [of nationhood] new – and often better – expression' (Blair 2000a).

¹⁰ I have been unable to ascertain the fate of this august role following the UK General Election of June 2001. Since the election Mills has become a Minister in the Lord Chancellor's Department where his list of responsibilities includes devolution, but not patriotism. But given that the 'envoy' role appears to have been almost entirely lacking in substance (see Wills 2001), it may be that it has simply disappeared – for the time being at least.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that Gordon Brown seems to refer to British identity rather than British national identity in this context (see, for example, Brown 1999a 1999b). Given, however, that he regularly refers to Britain as 'a nation' in his speeches, it is probably unwise to read too much into this.

Scottish Affairs

Simultaneously, however, the same government spokesmen have also upheld a unitary or singular conception of British national identity. This claims Britain as one nation that is made up from, and subsumes, several constituent nations, namely England, Scotland, Wales and, more tenuously, Ireland. These constituent elements have bound together over time to form an inextricable whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. This position has underpinned many of Tony Blair's major speeches since he took over the Labour leadership (speeches whose nationalist stridency seems to render usage of Billig's 'banal' prefix redundant). So, for example, in 1995 he decried Conservatives for having 'spent 16 years tearing apart the fabric of our nation', declaring: 'One Britain. That is the patriotism of the future.' In perhaps his most nationalistic speech, namely his 1997 party conference address, the Prime Minister used the word 'Britain' 53 times, 'country' 31 times, and 'nation' 19 times (see Wintour 2000). This 'one nation' position is the same as that which has underpinned the form of unionism that enjoyed common sense status in British politics for the majority of the twentieth century. It sits very uneasily with any form of devolution, let alone a form of devolution that aims to recognise the salience and legitimacy of national differences.¹²

Labour's rhetoric, therefore, evokes both the singular and pluralist conceptions of British national identity. As far as I am aware, the Prime Minister has not felt moved to attempt to reconcile the positions. It may be that a means to bridge the gap between them could be manufactured on the basis provided by Gordon Brown's claim that: 'Perhaps uniquely in the world, Britain is not just a society of many communities, but also a country of nations – with large contiguous areas of national heritage' (Brown 1999a). But, in the present context, what is noteworthy is that government representatives' usage of both conceptions seems to be context-dependent (compare, for example, Blair (2000a) and Blair (2000b); or Brown (1999a and 1999b) with Brown (1999c)). The pluralist view is utilised in the context of comments specifically alluding to national identity and constitutional reform. In the more 'normal' or 'banal' contexts of discussion of education,

¹² *For reasons of space I have eschewed discussion of how arguments concerning 'multiculturalism' are related to the two conceptions of national identity in Britain that I have identified here. I will merely note that in both theory and practice, both views on national identity seem to be entirely consistent with a commitment 'multiculturalism'. See, for example, the similarities on this point between Robin Cook's 'controversial' pre-election speech (Cook 2001) and William Hague's strong defence of the unitary view of national identity (Hague 1999).*

National identity and the Politics of Welsh Devolution

health service reform, social security, and the like, the unitary conception is dominant (ironically, therefore, in precisely those areas in which responsibility has been devolved!). But while this may serve to gloss over any contradictions, the overall impression that remains is that the Labour Party's attitudes on the question of national identity are ambiguous and even confused. All of which merely serves to compound the Wales Labour Party's difficulties.

Compared to Labour and Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in Wales have, so far at least, made least effort to explicitly re-orientate themselves with regard to issues of national identity in the post-devolutionary context. For the Conservatives the problem is one of adapting to a situation that the party historically opposed (Jones 2001). So while the party did officially adopt the title 'Welsh Conservative Party' for its party organisation in Wales prior to the first Assembly election, and while its official position is that it now accepts the existence of a devolved Assembly, the focus has tended to remain on the 'dangers' it regards as inherent in devolution. Under the heading 'Wales our nation, Britain our country,' their 1999 Assembly election manifesto promised to 'work hard to make sure that devolution does not become an instrument that undermines our British identity and leads to the break-up of the United Kingdom'. Indeed regular sniping at the very existence of a devolved body in Wales by backbench Conservative MPs serves only to suggest that many Tories are still not fully reconciled to the new constitutional position of Wales.

Some Conservative Assembly Members are keenly aware of the dangers for what has traditionally been the second party in Wales if they continue to be perceived as the representatives of a (dwindling) anti-devolution rump (see, for example, Melding 2001). Nor has the significance of the association between a strong sense of Welsh national identity and lack of Conservative support (Table 2) been lost on them. Indeed the Conservative group in the National Assembly seems to be quietly attempting to carve out a position that is more akin to continental Christian Democracy than the late Thatcherism that dominates at the UK level. However, it is highly doubtful whether the party's activist base in Wales has yet shed its distaste for devolution, and the prospects for an explicitly distinctive profile for Welsh Conservatism remain dim.

Ironically, despite the fact that Liberal Democrats are long-standing advocates of devolution, the party faces a problem that is broadly analogous to that faced by the Conservatives in that its room for manoeuvre is somewhat constrained by the nature of its support. The evidence suggests

Scottish Affairs

that those electors who identify themselves with the Liberal Democrats actually tended to vote against devolution in the referendum (Wyn Jones and Trystan 1999). Moreover, the party's support in the Assembly election was drawn disproportionately from those towards the British end of the identity spectrum. It is likely, however, that the party will conclude that its disappointing performance in that election was more a reflection of its general lack of visibility in Wales than a cause for any fundamental rethink about its profile or platform. It is, after all, already a federal party and so it regards major organisational reforms as unnecessary. The party's real difficulty is that it has very few members in precisely those areas where Welsh national identity is strongest, that is in the south Wales valleys and those rural seats with a large proportion of Welsh speakers (Thomas 2001).

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that despite its absence from pre-devolution justifications for devolution, national identity has come to play a role of central importance in post-devolution politics in Wales. National identity was not only a significant determinant in how voters behaved at the time of the referendum, but was also an important factor in determining patterns of party support in the subsequent election to the National Assembly. Moreover, since the referendum, the two most important players on the political landscape in Wales – at the Assembly level at least – have sought to present themselves to the public in new ways that display clear awareness of the role that national identity plays in the new constitutional context.

In the immediate aftermath of the UK general election in June 2001, the absence of robust individual-level data makes it impossible to determine the relationship between national identity and voting behaviour at that poll (for a preliminary account of the election in Wales see Wyn Jones and Trystan (2001b)). The result in Wales was no overall change since the 1997 general election – Labour still hold 34 of the 40 Welsh constituencies, with Plaid Cymru representing 4, and the Liberal Democrats the remaining 2. But what is perhaps more noteworthy in the present context is that survey data suggests that there has been little change since 1999 in the share of the votes enjoyed by the four main parties. Respondents in the Welsh National Assembly Election Survey were asked how they would have voted if a UK general election had been held on the same day as the Assembly election. As Table 4 demonstrates, the results of the survey were remarkably similar to the actual result in 2001 (data from 1997 and the Assembly election have also been added for the sake of comparison). This in turn may be regarded as

National identity and the Politics of Welsh Devolution

reinforcing the argument that post-devolutionary electoral politics is likely to be characterised by the emergence of different voting patterns at the state and the devolved levels (Wyn Jones and Trystan, 2000, 2001b). If this supposition is correct then Labour will almost certainly face another strong challenge from Plaid Cymru when the next National Assembly election is held in 2003. All of this serves to confirm the argument advanced here, namely that national identity is likely to continue to play its new, more prominent role in Welsh politics in coming years. Three other indicators that point in the same direction may also be briefly mentioned.

First, analysis of the growth in nationalist support between the 1997 and 2001 general elections shows that this has taken place largely outside Plaid Cymru's Welsh-speaking heartland, specifically in areas such as the south Wales valleys where Welsh national identity is strong (Wyn Jones and Trystan 2001b). Secondly, and relatedly, the political parties themselves clearly believe that national identity is important, a belief which, even if it were not 'objectively' correct, is likely to be self-fulfilling. In the devolved context especially, the parties (or at least Labour, Plaid Cymru and, to a lesser extent, the Liberal Democrats) are competing for the mantle of the party that 'stands up for the interests of Wales'. Logically there is perhaps no reason why this should necessarily lead to national identity becoming part of the political discourse. But given the particularities and peculiarities of the Welsh context, it almost certainly will.

Table 4

Parties Electoral Performance

	1997 GE Vote	1999 NAW Constituency Vote	1999 NAW Regional Vote	1999 GE Vote (Notional)	2001 GE Vote
Labour	54.7	37.6	35.4	52.8	48.6
Conservatives	19.6	15.8	16.5	18.6	21.0
Plaid Cymru	9.9	28.4	30.5	14.0	14.3
Liberal Democrats	12.4	13.5	12.5	12.6	13.8
Others	3.4	4.7	5.1	2.0	2.3

Scottish Affairs

Sources: British Parliamentary Constituencies 1992 – 2001; Institute of Welsh Politics – Election Results; 1999 Welsh National Assembly Election Survey.

GE = UK general election

NAW = National Assembly for Wales

Finally, national identity is clearly set to remain a major issue at the UK level. The debate over UK membership of the European Single Currency, a debate which has, of course, a clear subtext, namely the future of the UK state's relationship with 'Europe', is being conducted in large measure as a debate over national identity. Current arguments about the implications of 'multiculturalism' also revolve around issues of national identity (Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain 2000). But while those most centrally involved in these arguments tend to focus on 'Britishness', when they are heard in the Welsh context – especially, perhaps, post-devolution – they inevitably raise issues concerning Welsh identity as well.

National identity will almost certainly therefore retain its new salience, at least for the foreseeable future. This is almost certainly not at all what Tony Blair and his cabinet colleagues had in mind when they brought devolution to the statute book. What they seem to have assumed is that, after devolution, political life would rapidly return to the status quo ante in all its essentials. It is interesting to speculate how they could have come to this assumption. Was it that they simply didn't think through the consequences of devolution? Or did these New Labour politicians succumb to the very traditional Labour view that, in the final analysis, the constitutional practices and institutions of the state are not particularly important – what matters, rather, is who holds power in Westminster (see Nairn 2000)? Whatever the explanation, there can be no doubt that despite the limited powers of the National Assembly, the new institutional context created by its establishment has already had a profound impact on Welsh politics and society. Institutions matter, as do identities. The combination of a new institution and an old identity taking on new forms is a potent one. Making sense of – and in – this context is clearly a significant challenge for all of those who are participants in, or observers of, post-devolution politics in Wales.

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August 2001