

REVIEW: CIVIC CULTURE AND THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES

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Kevin Morgan and Geoff Mungham, **Redesigning Democracy: the Making of the Welsh Assembly**, Bridgend: Seren Books, 2000, 246pp., £9.95, ISBN 185411283X.

J Barry Jones and John Osmond (eds), **Inclusive Government and Party Management: The National Assembly for Wales and the Work of its Committees**, Cardiff: Institute of Welsh Affairs/Welsh Governance Centre, 2001, 192pp., £15, ISBN 1871726697.

J Barry Jones and John Osmond (eds), **Building a Civic Culture: Institutional Change, Policy Development and Political Dynamics in the National Assembly for Wales**, Cardiff: Institute of Welsh Affairs/Welsh Governance Centre, 2002, 276pp., £15, ISBN 1871726794.

One could be forgiven had one harboured hopes that the devolution project in itself might be deemed so interesting that it would generate a greater flux of newsworthy reporting and critical assessments across and between the devolved territories. Yet, night after night, the BBC News presenters relegate us to our own neck of the devolved wood when they hand us over to their 'news teams across the UK'. Thus, we in Scotland learn little about the state of play in Wales, and vice versa. Of Northern Ireland we only hear in the context framed by 'Troubles' reportage – be it Catholic kids running the gauntlet on their way to Holy Cross School, or the break-in at Castlereagh. Little does trickle through about the 'normality' which had gained astonishing

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ground in the Northern Ireland Assembly before its suspension last autumn, little about the way the National Assembly for Wales evolves.

Luckily, the Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA), in conjunction with the Welsh Governance Centre (WGC) at Cardiff University, provides a constant stream of publications updating the Welsh devolution experience. For those not acquainted with Wales, Kevin Morgan and Geoff Mungham (both members of the WGC) provide a good starting point with their inside story – Morgan led the Yes campaign in the 1997 referendum, Mungham is a former Cardiff Labour councillor – of how the National Assembly for Wales was set up. Against the backdrop of the disastrous 1979 referendum they trace the long and often divisive campaign for a Welsh Assembly, mirrored by the conflicts and divisions within the Labour Party in Wales. In fact, they argue, and Osmond and Barry Jones concur, one of the outcomes of the campaign was the change from the Labour Party in Wales to a Welsh Labour Party. Although Morgan and Mungham wrote their account just before the downfall of Alun Micheal (which is covered in a postscript), it does help to understand the reasons that led to the replacement of Blair's favourite with Rhodri Morgan, less than a year after he had been accused by the Michael camp of having a 'separatist, crypo-nationalist agenda'.

Morgan and Mungham sketch two possible futures for the National Assembly. 'Business as usual' is their pessimistic view. Glamorgan County Council (or, to use a Scottish comparison, Lanarkshire) writ large, where internal division paralyses the Assembly. 'Making a difference' is the more optimistic variant, where constructive debate in a co-operative spirit provides better governance and makes a positive impact on the economy and on civil society in Wales. The authors see, after the first year of the Assembly, indications for both scenarios. Their verdict on the plenary work of the Assembly is negative: they are disappointed that it did not manage to discard the adversarial Westminster-style politics. Hope, on the other hand, rests with the evolving work of the committees where a new, more inclusive democracy appears to take shape.

John Osmond and J. Barry Jones, Directors of the IWA and WGC respectively, have undertaken to map the progress of the Assembly. Using Winston Roddick's image of 'a child without a parent', they emphasise the novelty of the institution. It is also indicative of the major difference with regard to the Scottish situation. The Scottish Parliament, based on a broad consensus worked out through the Constitutional Convention and the

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Consultative Steering Group, has primary legislative powers; the National Assembly, lacking that kind of pedigree, is constituted in the 1998 Government of Wales Act as a corporate body. While, as John Osmond put it recently, the Scottish Parliament could be seen as the final stone in a pre-constructed arch, the Assembly in Wales looked rather like the founding stone for an arch yet to be built. But this process seems well under way. One of the crucial developments so far in the life of the Assembly has been, according to these instructive volumes, its distinctive move away from a corporate body towards a Parliamentary institution. Despite its limited remit of only secondary legislation, it is beginning to create a set of Welsh law which in turn gives contours to an emerging civic culture. Pivotal in this process has been the growing distinction between the Executive and the Parliamentary side of the Assembly, symbolised in the establishment of an independent Office of the Presiding Officer.

This transformation of 'a civil society in Wales' into a 'Welsh civil society' goes hand in hand with the growing demand for increased powers for the National Assembly. 44% of the Welsh electorate are now in favour of making the powers of the Cardiff Assembly equal to those of the Scottish Parliament, while the figure for those opposing the Assembly on principle has significantly fallen from 40% in 1999 to 18% now (8% express their preference for an independent Wales).

Inclusive Government and Party Management and **Building a Civic Culture** give detailed analyses of the development and the working of the subject committees as well as the adjustment process of the political parties in Wales, culminating in the formation of a Partnership Coalition government under Rhodri Morgan in November 2000. As in Scotland, the committee structure is seen as central to the operation of the Assembly, but not all of them seem to have solved the tensions between their scrutinising and policy-making roles, and not all of them have broken new ground, leaving behind the adversarial patterns of Westminster politics. The latter seems to have been reinforced since the formation of the coalition government as, since then, there has been a much clearer government agenda to be implemented.

Like in Scotland, and on the basis of a strikingly similar election result in 1999, the parties have to come to terms with the new situation. The Labour Party's problems, according to Gerald Taylor, 'have been about creating an identifiably "Welsh" policy base, in the sense of one clearly originating from within the Welsh party and the Assembly, rather than emanating from

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Millbank in London' (**Building a Civic Culture**, p.202). Plaid Cymru, like the SNP for the first time a fully-fledged parliamentary party, and likewise having changed their leadership (from Dafydd Wigley to Ieuan Wyn Jones), seems still to have difficulties in making the transition from London to Cardiff, from an 'aspirational to an implementing party' (ibid.), highlighted by the troubled water it found itself in after raising the issue of immigration and its threat to the Welsh language. It was, apparently, easier to present a united Welsh front in Westminster than to make policy in the cultural minefield of Wales. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, too, have had leadership problems – Rod Richards was replaced by Nick Bourne, and the Lib Dem leader Mike German 'temporarily stood down' from his Cabinet post as Deputy First Minister in July 2001 (he was reinstated in June 2002 after charges against him had been dropped). While the Lib Dems are ardent advocates of a federal Britain, the Welsh Conservatives show tentative signs of conversion to devolution. Like in Scotland, the Tories have profited from an electoral system they did not want and an assembly they resisted to the last ditch. Since the formation of the partnership government, they have been able to position themselves more clearly as an opposition party.

What seems to be a common phenomenon between Scotland and Wales is the turn of focus away from purely constitutional questions towards policy delivery. But constitutional issues are never far below the surface. In light of its experience over the first two years, there has been an Assembly Review of Procedure. More far-reaching is the provision in the Partnership Agreement of an independent Commission expected to report in late 2003 – and widely expected to make the case for extending the powers of the Assembly, clarifying its competencies and giving it primary legislative responsibilities.

As Morgan and Mungham pointed out, the Welsh devolution arrangements have highlighted the complexity of relationships between the Assembly and local government, UK government, and Europe. What we see evolving in Wales is perhaps more akin to regional tiers of governance elsewhere in Europe than the Scottish example. It is definitely more directly applicable to the English regions.

From the beginning in September 2000, Wales has – like Scotland – been part of a network of European 'constitutional' regions which, in May 2001, formulated the so-called Flanders Declaration. In view of the 2004 Intergovernmental Conference, Wales joined Bavaria, Catalunya, Flanders, North-Rhine Westphalia, Salzburg, Scotland and Wallonia arguing for a

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stronger role of self-governing regions in Europe: 'I am convinced,' wrote Rhodri Morgan, 'that regions with legislative power have a vital part to play in bringing the work of the EU closer to its citizens' (**Building a Civic Culture**, p.65). Clearly, the First Minister is linking the debate about European governance and subsidiarity with the demand for an increase in the Assembly's powers.

To see, from a Scottish point of view, how Wales is catching up, and to note the subtle differences in the discourse on multi-level governance, is instructive and provides a welcome respite from our national pastime of navel-gazing.

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