

## **REVIEW: POST DEVOLUTION WALES**

*Nicola McEwen*

Paul Chaney, Tom Hall and Andrew Pithouse (eds), **New Governance – New Democracy? Post Devolution Wales**, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001, 250 pp, pb, £14.99, ISBN 0 7083 1678 6.

There has been some criticism about the quality of scholarship pertaining to post-devolution Scotland (Mitchell 2001). It is doubtful whether the same charge could justifiably be made of the academic community in Wales. The 'Politics and Society in Wales' series, from which this book has emerged, promises to provide much of the research and scholarship required to evaluate the impact of the new political system and inform ongoing debate about the constitutional settlement. Chaney, Hall and Pithouse have produced an excellent collection of chapters compiled by five teams of social scientists working primarily within the University of Wales. Each team explores 'devolution in action' to establish whether and how the National Assembly for Wales (NAW) is shaping political and social life.

This book has three editors, eight chapters and 13 authors. Many edited collections of this nature can appear disjointed and offer chapters of varying quality. However, the standard of the chapters in this book is generally high, and the editors have achieved coherence by building the book around a critical assessment of the key themes of devolution: accessibility, representativeness, legitimacy, openness, participation, innovation, inclusiveness and accountability. These overlapping objectives, as set out in the Devolution White Paper and government speeches made during the passage of the devolution legislation, will also be familiar to students of Scottish devolution. Often ill-defined, they reflect the supposed virtues of the devolution project, couched within the rhetoric of 'new politics' and the aspiration of greater democratisation. As the stated aims of devolution, they

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are given a critical airing in this book, with five distinctive research projects examining the extent to which these objectives are being fulfilled.

In the first project, Wyn Jones and Trystan examine the objectives of legitimacy and participation in their study of the first Welsh election in 1999. The turnout in the Welsh election was just 45.9%, raising serious questions about the legitimacy of the devolution project. As Wyn Jones and Trystan observe, there is no direct correspondence in theory or comparative practice between levels of political participation and political legitimacy. However, this was considered important in Wales because of the wafer-thin majority secured in the 1997 Welsh devolution referendum, as well as the rhetoric of participative democracy promoted by the architects of devolution. Their analysis of the 1999 election survey is intriguing and important. According to their findings, non-voting could be best explained by an antipathy or indifference to political parties and politics in general, and had very little to do with attitudes towards the devolution project. Indeed, those most likely to vote in 1999 were those who had voted against devolution in the referendum. 'With relatively few exceptions', they conclude, 'non-voters tend to be apathetic rather than antipathetic towards the National Assembly' (p. 45).

The second study examines the extent to which Welsh devolution has fostered inclusive and representative government. Drawing upon a large number of interviews with politicians and representatives of civil society, Betts et al examine the extent to which the National Assembly for Wales is perceived to have responded to the needs of women and people with disabilities, and to have facilitated their engagement with the democratic process. The first NAW had even greater success in its gender representation than did the Scottish Parliament, with women making up 42% of Assembly Members (AMs). The study suggests that women's groups felt that progress is being made in fostering inclusion and promoting a gender equality agenda. However, the National Assembly has fallen far short of achieving the inclusion and representation of people with disabilities. In a similar study, Williams and Chaney note the marginalisation and alienation of the black and ethnic minority communities. While some progress could be identified in Executive-sponsored initiatives such as the All Wales Ethnic Minority Association and the mainstreaming of race equality issues within Assembly Committees, the authors found that black and ethnic minorities greeted the objective of inclusiveness with a deep sense of disillusionment. The marginalisation and alienation of disabled and ethnic minority groups is reflected in and exacerbated by their lack of political representation. The National Assembly

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has no ethnic minority members, and just two AMs declared themselves disabled. Williams and Chaney further suggest that while the new institutions were designed to be inclusive, they have been constructed upon a social and political culture which continues to exclude minority groups.

Inclusiveness and accessibility may have found greater success in the evolving partnership between government and the voluntary sector, the focus of the third study. Civil society in Wales has historically been weaker than its Scottish counterpart (Paterson and Wyn Jones 1999), but Welsh civic organisations forged a role for themselves as part of the 'Yes for Wales' campaign and in consultations of the Advisory Group which influenced the design of the Assembly. The Government of Wales Act imposed a statutory requirement on the devolved government to provide assistance to and consult with the voluntary sector. Indeed, Dicks et al found that the voluntary sector had been galvanised by devolution, re-orientating their resources, output and policy programme in response to the new opportunities offered by the Assembly, while the Wales Council for Voluntary Action now enjoys greater access to key decision-makers. However, new opportunities give rise to new and expanded workloads, and the authors were sceptical as to the extent to which inclusiveness and access could incorporate smaller, resource-weak community organisations.

In their study of the impact of devolution upon economic development, Morgan and Rees make the rather bold assertion that the Assembly will ultimately be judged on its performance with respect to the economy. Drawing upon the literature on social capital (Putnam et al 1993), they examine the claim that devolution should enhance economic development. This claim is based upon two assumptions: firstly, that devolution 'empowers local knowledge', enabling decision-makers to develop policies more attuned to local circumstances; and, secondly, that it fosters greater interconnectedness, collaboration and trust – sometimes referred to as 'institutional thickness' – on the part of the various actors involved. However, Morgan and Rees suggest that whereas devolution may have rendered the policy-making process more transparent and more inclusive, this has not necessarily produced positive results for economic development. The partnership requirements imposed upon the National Assembly also incorporate the business community, but the evidence of the early years casts doubt upon the extent to which the Business Partnerships are an effective means of strengthening relationships between the actors engaged in economic development. The Welsh Development Agency, in theory the organisation at

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the heart of the new system of economic development, felt marginalised from the Assembly and undervalued by AMs. The authors argue that the potential influence of the business community has been hampered by their inability to speak with a coherent voice, as well as their failure to adapt to the new rules of the game, or direct resources and policies to the new political context.

The final study examines the extent to which devolution has increased political control of public agencies. This is essential to an evaluation of the objective of enhanced accountability. A directly elected Assembly may increase political accountability, but this would be considerably weakened if public organisations were not made more accountable to the politicians. Ashworth et al examine regulation across key areas of public service delivery in local government, higher education, economic development, and housing associations, in the pre- and post-devolution era. In almost every case, the scrutiny exercised by the Welsh Office in the pre-devolutionary regulatory framework was considered to be problematic. This was attributed to ambiguity over measures of good performance, inappropriate data with which to measure performance, and a 'fear of regulation' on the part of the Welsh Office civil servants. The establishment of the National Assembly has extended and enhanced scrutiny arrangements, with Assembly Committees assuming a key role in ensuring public service organisations deliver best value. Ashworth et al detect little fear of regulation on the part of AMs, but suggest that organisational accountability would only be significantly enhanced if the other problems of the pre-devolution era were also addressed.

This is an important book, and an important series, and represents a worthy contribution to our understanding of how devolution is unfolding. Each of the studies has adopted a rigorous methodological approach, and the analyses are strengthened by being theoretically-grounded. Although primarily intended as an assessment of the development of Welsh devolution, it also offers lessons for scholars of devolution elsewhere in the UK. Devolution in the different regions and nations of the United Kingdom has assumed various forms and responded to different needs and demands. However in each case, it has been defended and promoted within the rhetoric of inclusive engagement and democratic accountability. It is appropriate that such ill-defined, if laudable, aspirations are explored as thoroughly as they have been in these studies.

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