

## **REVIEW: THE DYNAMICS OF DEVOLUTION**

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Alan Trench (ed.), **The Dynamics of Devolution: The State of the Nations**, Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005, 300 pp, pb, £17.95, ISBN 1-84540-036-4.

As the next elections for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly loom, it is timely to reflect upon the achievements of the second terms of devolved government. This book on 'The Dynamics of Devolution' refreshes the mind on some key aspects of the evolving devolution scene. But in truth the biggest dynamic happened only a month or so before this writing when Wales received the privilege of being able to make laws on its own reserved matters. To be sure, permission has to be sought from Westminster beforehand, but many observers consider this change to be significant, a sign of the maturing of Assembly machinery and representation, and expressive of Ron Davies's lucidity in remarking that devolution in Wales is a process not an event. The process by which this dynamic proceeded is also worth recollecting. In the first term Wales was ruled by a Liberal-Labour coalition. Many neutrals think it was relatively well-ruled, better under coalition than under the current minority Labour administration. Probably Scotland has benefited from coalition too. One achievement of the Liberals in Wales was to press for an Inquiry into the prospects of the Welsh Assembly receiving greater powers. This resulted in the all-party, independent Richard Commission, which reported, to the surprise of even Lord Richard himself that Wales warranted equivalent powers to those enjoyed by the Scottish Parliament. A particular emphasis was placed on the bestowing of legislative powers upon the Assembly government.

Hence, from the perspective of Wales, this decision of Westminster, rather than the actual performance of the present Assembly Government, has given the greatest dynamic to Welsh affairs since devolution itself. Most recently, something of a strange dynamic involving not uninteresting stalemates has typified the checkerboard of political affairs in Wales. This is because of Labour's minority government status produced by the defection from Labour of the late Peter Law and his successor Independent AM. At least three

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interesting policy outcomes ensued, in each case forced on Labour's Welsh Assembly Government by the combined opposition of Plaid Cymru, Liberal Democrats and Conservatives. The first was the rejection of Labour's policy of charging university students tuition fees at the same rate as those in England. This was out-voted and a new solution arose, different from that prevailing in either Scotland or England. Students from Wales continue to pay the old £1,200 rate and the Assembly Government makes up the difference of £1,800. The second notable blockage was of Labour's budget, which was voted down and subsequently incurred changes – for example, increasing funding for rural schools where Labour stringency would have caused unwanted closures. The third major palaver occurred either side of Christmas 2005 when the Minister for Culture sought to complete First Minister Rhodri Morgan's widely criticised 'bonfire of the quangos' by filleting the Arts Council for Wales's big ticket budget items and appropriating responsibility for them to his own department. This Orwellian scenario was halted by the Assembly's united opposition, and a review of policy was enforced. Sadly, this was too late to prevent the sacking of the Arts Council's Chairman, Geraint Talfan Davies, widely perceived as the most able arts ambassador Wales had ever had. Tellingly, Davies had been appointed by the Liberal Democrat Minister of Culture in the first-term days of the Lib-Lab coalition, he was thus 'a troublesome priest', now temporarily replaced by his Labour-supporting deputy, Professor Dai Smith.

So I approached this review with these things in mind wondering if the wellsprings of these dynamic events in Westminster constitutionalism and the *realpolitik* of minority governments and coalitions were presciently prefigured. I turned first to my old friend John Osmond's chapter on Wales which is entitled 'Wales: Towards 2007'. In its very first sentence, indeed its first three words, 'The Richard Commission' is the focus. So full marks to JO on that count! He points out that the Commission also advocated an increase of a third in the present 60 elected representatives, and the use of the single transferable vote proportional electoral system. These important changes have yet to come to pass and were seemingly unnoticed in the PR blitz on legislation fronted by Peter Hain, the now part-time Secretary of State for Wales, and the First Minister. John Osmond reminds us that even Labour Lord (Ivor) Richard did not expect the all-party representatives on the Commission he chaired to be unanimous. 'The reason they (were) was because they looked at the evidence' was Richard's lawyerly explanation. Osmond goes on to hit his second bullseye by arguing that if proportional representation were ever introduced its main effect would be to make coalition more likely than not – and its implication

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that, to keep Labour out, the other parties would have to co-operate. Hence, Richard's 'evidence' must have been powerful indeed for Labour's representatives on the Commission to support a voting system that weakens its chances of governing Wales.

The 'evidence' included strongly supportive submissions from the trade union movement in Wales. Finally, a large chunk of the chapter is devoted to the position of Plaid Cymru on the prospects of coalition. It is an irony that, while all three present opposition parties regularly connive to oppose Labour policies they do not like, it is Plaid that seems to find it hardest to contemplate an alliance involving Tories. When I subsequently read the editor's introduction to the book, I found he completely misunderstood this particular 'dynamic.' Indeed representatives of Plaid's influential left-wing have stated that they would prefer an alliance with Labour, despite them being mortal political enemies, especially in Valleys constituencies. This issue too is touched upon in this chapter in referencing the 'maturing' of democracy consequent upon devolution in Wales or rather, in grassroots Plaid terms, its relative absence. But after 2007, who knows?

I then jumped to James Mitchell's chapter on Scotland, sub-titled 'Devolution is Not Just for Christmas'. The point of this oft-repeated apophthegm seems to be, in the connotation of its originator Michael Forsyth, Scotland's last Tory Secretary of State, that devolution needs goodwill and partnership all year round, thus indicating a certain maturity of perspective yet to have to be evolved in the aforementioned outer reaches of the Party of Wales. But I found it slightly odd that this brand of politician or at least his Thatcherite associates should be accredited with the fact that devolution gained the support it did at the referendum. The Major era in the UK was scarcely Thatcherite, more like Fawlty Towers, if anything, it seemed to me. In other respects this chapter was also somewhat backward-looking in order to peer into a future for Scottish devolution which was rather difficult to discern. My next port of call was the editor's introductory chapter to see whether the dynamics of devolution were intended to work backwards or forwards. In its very first line the Ron Davies 'process not event' quotation is reproduced and given unexpected weight in 'devolution studies' in general. Another bullseye I thought and quite liked the discussion of its meaning. However, like other writings by metropolitan devolutionists, Alan Trench surprises this reader with the fearfulness and sense of relief that 'the British state has withstood' devolution and that 'the British state proved more robust than had been predicted or believed.' This bunker mentality is also expressed in Trench's selection of John Major's 'Say no to

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this doomed enterprise' article in **The Times** of 30 August 1997. This depicts Major in some weird combination of the aforementioned B. Fawcay – 'it would hurt people ... break-up of UK' – dressed in Private Fraser's Home Guard uniform. Conservatism even of this ilk contrasts enormously with, for example, David Osborne's **Laboratories of Democracy** position on the *advantages* of devolution for the dynamics of modern policy-making, from which policy learning by an over-stifling central state apparatus may arise. Quite a lot of the other chapters are rather in this vein, and with not a great deal constructive to say about anomalies like the Barnett formula, to which Trench seems to offer 'thanks' for helping avoid the break-up of the UK, and even David Bell and Alex Christie, while recognising its anomalies, conclude – otiosely – it's not the formula's fault! So another comfort blanket of a book on devolution which, with few exceptions, rarely illuminates the dynamics of the 'process' in question.

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