



Debate

Labour's Welsh Hegemony Shaken In 1999, Stirred In 2001

John Osmond

The outcome of the 2001 general election in Wales allowed all four parties to claim an advance. However, the real battle is still to come — in May 2003 when the National Assembly goes to the polls.

On the day of the 2001 general election the Guardian newspaper ran a full page map of the United Kingdom indicating the “seats to watch”. In Wales only one constituency registered: the Rhondda. “There has always been a Labour MP in these Welsh mining valleys since 1885,” the commentary began. “The tradition is being put under some strain by the adoption of Chris Bryant, a gay former vicar from Cardiff.”¹

That the Rhondda should be thought interesting in a British general election was one demonstration of how far the previous election for the National Assembly in 1999 had changed expectations. Plaid Cymru's incursion into the Valleys on that occasion, slashing Labour majorities and taking Llanelli, Islwyn and, of course, the Rhondda, had established a new high tide for nationalism. However, there was never any doubt that the tide would fall back in 2001. Only a few pundits and over-excited activists could imagine otherwise. The central question in any British election is who should occupy Downing Street for the next four or five years, a question Plaid Cymru can never address.

Nonetheless, the two campaigns – 1999 and 2001 – intertwined in sometimes subtle ways that the formal results did not reveal. ‘Promos’ are among the best things coming out of BBC Wales these days and the one that trailed its inaugural overnight results programme provided a glimpse of what was going on. It showed people queuing up in a corner shop to buy batteries. They needed them to charge up their handsets, ready to flick channels between BBC 1, for the British results, and BBC 2 Wales for the Welsh. It was an acknowledgement that two campaigns were underway, one for Westminster and the other a dry run for the next contest for Cardiff Bay, scheduled to take place in May 2003. Indeed, had it not been for

¹ Guardian, 7 June 2001. This statement was, of course, inaccurate: ‘The Welsh mining Valleys’ elected their first representative not in 1885 but in 1906 when Keir Hardie was returned for Merthyr Tydful.

devolution it is doubtful whether there would have been a Welsh-based results programme at all.

Measured by what most counts in a British election, the seats or scalps that the parties carry home, the results that emerged at the end of the night in Wales represented a complete status quo: that is to say 34 Labour, four Plaid Cymru, two Liberal Democrats, and again nil for the Conservatives. The immediate interpretation was that Labour retained its iron grip on Welsh politics, Plaid Cymru had fallen back, the Liberal Democrats remained confined to rural mid Wales, while the Conservatives were in free fall. The reality for Welsh politics was that all the parties could claim to have moved forward, though on different fronts, while the real battle is still to come in two years time. Table 1 tells some of the story:

Table 1
All-Wales Election Results for 2001, 1999 and 1997

	2001 General Election Turn-out: 61.6%		1999 Assembly Election* Turn-out: 46%		1997 General Election Turn-out: 73.6%	
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%
Labour	666,955	48.6	384,671	37.6	886,935	54.7
Plaid Cymru	195,892	14.3	290,572	28.4	161,030	9.9
Lib Dem	189,434	13.8	137,857	13.5	200,020	12.4
Conservative	288,665	21.0	162,133	15.8	317,127	19.6

*The figures shown are for the Constituency Vote. The Regional Lists gave Labour 361,657 votes (35.5%), Plaid Cymru 312,048 (30.6%), Liberal Democrats 128,008 (12.5%), and Conservatives 168,206 (16.5%)

These comparative statistics set against their respective turn-outs are revealing. Comparing the 2001 and 1997 Westminster elections, while Labour maintained a commanding position the number of people actually voting for the party fell by 219,980, or 24.8 per cent. In the case of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, the numbers voting for them also dropped, though to a much lesser extent. On the other hand Plaid Cymru not only saw its relative party position move into third place, but more significantly increased the numbers actually voting for it by 34,862, that is 21.6 per cent, in a situation where the overall turn-out fell by 12 percentage points.

All the parties drew comfort from these results. Labour began its campaign claiming that it had absorbed the lessons from the poor results it achieved in the first Assembly elections. In particular it would be identifying more closely with Welsh concerns. Rhodri Morgan insisted that the party's Welsh manifesto was "very Welsh, written in Wales to answer Welsh needs, made in Wales and developed in Wales."²

Winning Ynys Mon from Plaid Cymru provided Labour with most satisfaction. It allowed the party's Communications Director, Huw Evans, to point out that in contrast to Plaid Cymru Labour could now present itself as the 'true party of Wales':

² 'We've got the message, says Morgan', *Western Mail*, 10 May 2001

“Not only do we represent all four corners of the country; we represent Welsh and English-speaking areas, urban and rural areas. That’s the most encouraging thing for us from these results and totally vindicates our decision to fight an essentially one-nation campaign.”³

Despite this assertion Labour’s loss of Carmarthen East to Plaid Cymru, means it has retreated from the whole of rural central Wales and now represents largely urban areas. It also saw its support fall in relative terms across most of Wales. The fall was most noticeable in the Valleys where a swathe of seats saw a drop of around 10 per cent, with Merthyr and Islwyn both down by 13 per cent. Only in five seats did Labour’s percentage vote rise, and then by relatively small amounts – Caernarfon (2.8 per cent), Cardiff South and Penarth (2.8 per cent), Ynys Mon (1.8 per cent), Clwyd West (1.7 per cent) and Conwy (6.8 per cent). Conwy had been widely thought to be a four-way marginal. However, it was a collapse in the Liberal Democrat vote, which fell by 14 per cent, which converted it into a relatively safe Labour seat.

Table 2
Ynys Mon Election Results for 2001, 1999 and 1997

	2001 General Election Turn-out: 64.0%		1999 Assembly Election Turn-out: 59.6%		1997 General Election Turn-out: 75.4%	
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%
Labour	11,906	35.0	7,181	22.9	13,275	33.2
Plaid Cymru	11,106	32.6	16,469	52.6	15,756	39.5
Lib Dem	2,772	8.1	1,630	5.2	1,537	3.8
Conservative	7,653	22.5	6,031	19.3	8,569	21.5

Moreover, the Ynys Mon result bears examination. Although Labour performed well, Table 2 reveals it was mainly a combination of other factors that enabled it to win the seat. These were a substantial fall in Plaid Cymru’s support, against the trend over most of the rest of Wales. Compared with 1997 Plaid Cymru’s vote fell in five seats, all within or close to its heartland territory – Ynys Mon (by 29.5 per cent); Caernarfon (26.8 per cent); Ceredigion (20.8 per cent); Clwyd West (17.9 per cent); and Meirionnydd (16.1 per cent). These falls can be attributed to the election’s general fall in turn-out, affecting Plaid disproportionately where its vote is relatively high. In the case of Ynys Mon there were added elements: an internal Plaid split due to a disputed selection process, together with a strong performance by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in a high-profile, closely-fought contest. Elsewhere, as we have seen, Plaid Cymru’s vote rose, notably in Carmarthen East where there it took the seat on an 8 per cent swing from Labour, as Table 3 shows:

³ *Western Mail*, 9 June

Table 3
Carmarthen Election Results for 2001, 1999 and 1997

	2001 General Election		1999 Assembly Election		1997 General Election	
	Turn-out: 70.4%		Turn-out: 60.9%		Turn-out: 78.6%	
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%
Labour	13,540	35.6	10,348	31.7	17,907	42.9
Plaid Cymru	16,130	42.4	17,328	53.1	14,457	34.6
Lib Dem	2,815	7.4	2,202	6.7	3,150	7.5
Conservative	4,912	12.9	2,776	8.5	5,022	12.0

The loss of Ynys Mon, together with failed expectations in southern Wales – in particular Llanelli, Rhondda and Caerphilly - created a sense that Plaid Cymru had made no real headway in the election. Yet its share of the vote went up by four points, to 14.3 per cent. Its previous best performance in a Westminster general election was in 1970 when it polled 11.5 per cent (175,016 votes on a 77.4 per cent turnout). Perhaps more significantly, its support is beginning to rise in eastern Wales above the derisory levels it has achieved in the past. Of course, the decisive break was made in the first Assembly elections. But the trend was confirmed in 2001. In the past, for example, the party has regularly lost deposits in Westminster elections in most of the eastern constituencies, fifteen in 1997 from Alyn and Deeside and Wrexham to the Cardiff seats and the Vale of Glamorgan. In 2001, however, it lost deposits (polling below 5 per cent) in just five seats: Alyn and Deeside, Brecon and Radnor, Monmouth, Newport East and Cardiff Central.

The Conservatives' repeated failure to win a single seat in Wales, combined with the wider defeat across Britain, contributed to a view that they were withering on the vine as a serious force in Welsh politics. Yet the Conservative performance was far from disastrous. Its overall Welsh vote at 21 per cent, closer to the 25 to 33 per cent range it has persistently achieved in Wales over more than a century. In its key target seats – Monmouth (where it came within 400 votes), Brecon and Radnor, Clwyd West, and Preseli – the party performed strongly. Of course, listing these seats also describes an old problem - that historically the party has done well on the peripheral (British) edge of Welsh politics and is regarded by a majority of Welsh voters as a closet 'English' party. Paradoxically, however, this second large-scale defeat in terms of failing to win a Welsh seat is likely to assist those who are making the case for a stronger Welsh identity for the Conservative Party. Within days of the election Glyn Davies, AM for Mid and West Wales, was arguing:

“Our attitude towards the National Assembly is the key to convincing the Welsh people that we are totally committed to ‘sticking up for Wales’. Whether we like it or not, the National Assembly is here to stay and the Conservative Party’s commitment to it is the measure by which our commitment to Wales

will be judged ... Our strategy for Wales may include a Welsh political leader and may involve more autonomy for the Welsh Conservative Party, but at the heart of any strategy must lie a 100 per cent commitment to an effective Assembly.”

The 2001 election also brought some encouragement for the Welsh Liberal Democrats. It made no substantial advance but did not retreat either. In rural Wales the party fought off a strong Conservative assault in Brecon and Radnor and performed well in Ceredigion. In Cardiff Central, its main target, seat it ran Labour to within a percentage point (659 votes), despite an HTV NOP constituency poll early in the campaign forecasting it would trail by 19 per cent. Before the election Liberal Democrats were worried that their participation in the Coalition with Labour in the National Assembly might damage their prospects. There was no sign that this was the case. Neither was there evidence that they were affected by the difficulties affecting their Assembly leader, Deputy First Minister Mike German, who during the campaign faced renewed allegations of fraud in his previous position as Head of the Welsh Joint Education Committee’s European Unit.

In terms of Welsh politics the decisive election takes place in May 2003. This will be the test of whether Labour’s Welsh hegemony, shaken in 1999 and now stirred in 2001, will crumble or be sustained. In 2003 the second landslide New Labour Government in Westminster will be in mid-term. Welsh Labour will be anxious for it to be seen to be improving the key public services – health, education and transport – if disillusionment is not to undermine its chances in the second Assembly election. The timescale does not augur well. While a week may be a long time in politics, even two years may not be enough to offset decades of under-investment in the public sector. This is a crunch issue for Wales and other Labour heartlands which are characterised by heavy reliance on public expenditure.

It was noteworthy that in the general election Labour’s Welsh Manifesto set specific targets for advances in health and education that only the National Assembly can meet. When Labour entered office in 1997 public expenditure accounted for some 59 per cent of GDP in Wales, 54 per cent in the North East and 31 per cent in Scotland as against 32-35 per cent in the South East and Eastern Regions of England. Plainly it is the high public expenditure Regions that have most interest in the patterns of public expenditure. Yet total public expenditure in the UK as a whole fell sharply from 41.2 per cent of GDP in 1996-97, the last Conservative year of office, to 37.7 per cent in 1999/2000. Last year’s Comprehensive Spending Review was meant to address this, promising to spend an extra £43 billion by 2003/2004 to revive public services. But even in the Review’s last year of 2003/2004 – the year of the next Assembly election – the public expenditure total is still expected to reach only 40.5 per cent of GDP, well below what it was in the early years of the Major government, when it peaked at 44.1 per cent, and even further below the 46 per cent EU average.⁴

The present spending cycle, deemed by Labour as ‘generous’, will take us to the next Assembly elections, in 2003. The next CSR settlement for Wales is likely to revert to a more stringent allocation unless the next Assembly election results create a political situation where Labour feels obliged to make more money available. What would that situation be? Labour will maintain that only a continued Labour-led government

⁴ The statistics are taken from Kevin Morgan, *The New Territorial Politics: Rivalry and Justice in Post Devolution Britain*, Regional Studies, Vol. 35, 2001, re-published in DEBATE below

in the Assembly can have effective influence with the Labour government in Westminster. Plaid Cymru will argue that only a stronger presence for them will deliver results.

These public expenditure arguments provide the background for another, perhaps more fundamental debate. This is over the distribution of funding from Whitehall to Wales, England, Scotland and Northern Ireland as determined by the Barnett formula. Northern England and Wales want the formula, first established in 1978, revisited so that it can take account of need rather than simply population. Scotland, which does well out of the status quo, is resisting change.⁵ It is hard to see how Labour which has interests in both camps can benefit from the argument. And, indeed, during the election campaign an announcement was discreetly slipped out, by Alistair Campbell, the Prime Minister's spokesman, stating that the formula would not be reviewed during the coming Parliament.⁶

At the outset of the 2001 election Rhodri Morgan described Plaid Cymru as the Oliver Twist of Welsh politics: "They always want more, more, more," he declared.⁷ A question in 2003 will be whether the Welsh electorate identify more with the Oliver Twist or the Mr Bumble tendency in public expenditure.

June 2001

John Osmond has been Director of the Institute of Welsh Affairs since 1996. Previously a journalist and television producer his publications include *Creative Conflict: The Politics of Welsh Devolution* (1978), *The Divided Kingdom* (1988) and *Welsh Europeans* (1996).

⁵ See Ross Mackay, *The Search for Balance: Taxing and Spending Across the United Kingdom*, Institute of Welsh Affairs, July 2001, for an analysis of the debate

⁶ 'Ruling out of spending formula shake-up angers English regions', *Financial Times*, 17 May 2001

⁷ *Western Mail*, 10 May 2001