



Debate

Consensus Growing for Stronger Assembly

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During June 2001 Market Research Wales carried out an opinion poll on attitudes to the National Assembly. The pollsters contacted 1008 people across Wales in a telephone canvass. The results provide a highly positive measure of the devolution process in Wales with 62% now in favour of the Assembly and 38% opposed, a significant shift when compared with the referendum in 1997. Moreover, 49% of respondents supported the strengthening of the National Assembly to give it powers at least equivalent to those of the Scottish Parliament. In addition, the poll shows that traditional regional cleavages within Wales have narrowed suggesting that a more cohesive Welsh attitude to devolution is emerging.

By any measure the National Assembly's formative years have been stormy. The wafer thin majority in the referendum raised doubts about the commitment of the Welsh voters and the legitimacy of the whole project. The departure of one Welsh Secretary (Ron Davies) and the appointment of another (Alun Michael), generally regarded as having been imposed by Tony Blair, did little to enhance the devolutionary process. Furthermore, the failure of the Welsh Labour Party to win an overall majority in the first Assembly elections frustrated the expectation of strong and consistent policies, arguably one of the main justifications for devolution. The resultant scenario of 'all-party inclusive policy-making' was less than convincing and eventually led to Alun Michael losing a vote of 'no confidence' in February 2000. While the creation of the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition the following October and a three year policy programme marked a significant improvement, the situation is now confused by Mike German's decision to withdraw from the post of Deputy First Minister and Minister for Economic Development. It is against this background of

institutional initiatives, political experimentation and plain damage limitation that this poll of Welsh public opinion was taken.

Table 1: Attitudes to Devolution

	%
Strongly in favour	11
In favour	40
Against	19
Strongly against	13
Don't know	18

The poll was designed to measure general attitudes towards devolution in Wales and the National Assembly during the first two years of its operation. The results give a positive measure of the devolution process in Wales. When asked the question '*What are your personal views on devolution for Wales, that is the creation of the National Assembly for Wales, which has taken over responsibility for areas such as health and education in Wales?*', a majority (51 per cent) were in favour or strongly in favour of devolution, with only 32 per cent against. There has been a shift in popular opinion since the Welsh referendum in 1997. If one excludes the 18 per cent 'Don't Knows', 62 per cent now support devolution, with 38 per cent opposed.

However, a note of caution should be sounded. Polls taken before the 1997 devolution referendum produced similar results although they were seeking Welsh opinion on an abstract concept rather than on an existing structure such as the National Assembly. At a more speculative level it might be argued that Welsh identity for so long the product exclusively of cultural criteria, has now acquired an institutional base. In other words the Assembly might be a poor weakly institution, but it is ours.

Table 2: Policies and Processes

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree strongly	Don't know
'The quality of public services has improved under the Assembly'	2	22	48	12	16
'The say of people in decision-making has improved under the Assembly'	3	33	38	9	17
'The existence of the Assembly has given Wales more lobbying power within the UK government'	5	41	33	9	13

On more specific questions about the effectiveness of the National Assembly, the Welsh people appear to be less confident about the Assembly. Firstly, the majority (60 per cent) of those asked disagreed with the statement that '*The quality of public*

services has improved under the Assembly', indicating that the Welsh public are still waiting for 'the Assembly to deliver'. This is to be expected. The Assembly is only two years old and only in the longer term will it be able to impact on the deep seated economic and social problems facing the country.

On the issue of whether the existence of the Assembly has democratized the political processes in Wales, respondents were split almost evenly, with a small majority against the proposition that '*The say of people in decision-making has improved under the Assembly*'. This is an immediate problem for the Assembly which appears to reflect the general disillusionment with politics in the UK, recently indicated by the low general election turnout. The Assembly still needs to convince a large section of the Welsh public that devolution is bringing Welsh politics closer to the Welsh people.

Proponents of devolution and the Assembly Administration in particular will take comfort from the slight majority of people who agreed that '*The existence of the Assembly has given Wales more lobbying power within the UK government*'. This view represents quite a sophisticated assessment, recognising on the one hand the limited nature of the legislative powers devolved to Wales and, on the other, the enhanced lobbying capacity exercised by a 'democratic assembly' compared with a Secretary of State heading a small central government department.

A number of factors could account for this positive shift in Welsh opinion. As a result of the election of Rhodri Morgan as First Minister, the almost daily adverse publicity stopped and was replaced by far more positive media reportage, a process helped by an end to the damaging European Funding feuds in the plenary sessions of the National Assembly. The second factor was the advent of coalition government and the more familiar Westminster style of procedure and decision making. The dividing line between government and opposition was no longer blurred; the Assembly's operations became more understandable to the Welsh public. Thirdly, the AMs and civil servants became more familiar with the devolved system.

It is clear that Welsh priorities for Assembly expenditure are broadly in line with those of the UK as a whole, as shown in Table 3. This is significant because the NHS and Education are two areas where the Assembly has devolved powers to define and apply to Welsh solutions. There is a clear constraint however. Whilst the Assembly can influence details of policy implementation and spending priorities, education and health have large budgets closely monitored by the UK Treasury and subject to detailed regulation and efficiency targets. The Assembly's other priorities – such as training, environment, transport, urban development and rural assistance – do not figure highly in the public's perceptions of important spending priorities.

Table 3: Priorities for Public Expenditure

1 st Priority	% of first preferences	2 nd priority	% of second preferences
NHS/Hospitals	43	Schools/Education	33
Schools/Education	21	NHS/Hospitals	26
Public Transport	6	Public Transport	8
Getting People into Jobs	4	Getting people into Jobs	4
Urban Development	3	Improving the Roads	3
Improving the Roads	3	Urban development	2
Support for Small Business	2	Improving the economy	2
Environmental Issues	2	Assistance to rural areas	2
Children's facilities	2	Other	7
Other	5	No preference	3
No preference	4	Don't know	10
Don't know	5		

The results in Table 4 are remarkable on three counts. Only 24 per cent support the pre-devolution arrangements. The prediction by Ron Davies that devolution would be a process rather than an event appears to have been vindicated. Furthermore, 49 per cent of respondents supported the strengthening of the National Assembly to give it powers at least equivalent to those of the Scottish Parliament. This is not surprising. The Welsh, while never the constitutional pacesetters, have always looked to follow Scotland's lead.

Table 4: Policies and Processes

Proposition	Percentage
Wales should become independent	11
Wales should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament, which has law-making and taxation powers	38
Wales should remain part of the UK, with its own elected Assembly, which has limited law-making powers only	24
Wales should remain part of the UK without an elected Assembly	24
No opinion/don't know	4

However, the most significant finding in Table 4 is that only four per cent of those asked had no opinion or did not know. This contrasts with polls taken before the referendum when between a quarter and a third were in the 'don't know' category. On referendum day many of these respondents tended to vote 'no'. There would appear to have been a small yet significant shift in Welsh public opinion.

Table 5: A Divided Nation?

	Total	NW Wales	NE Wales	SW and Mid-Wales	Valleys	SE Wales	Cardiff
Strongly in favour or in favour of devolution	51	56	51	47	55	48	51
Independence for Wales	11	10	8	13	11	11	11
Elected parliament with law-making and taxation powers	38	42	35	34	43	38	30
'The Assembly treats all regions within Wales fairly' (Agree strongly and agree)	36	38	29	37	33	37	44

The pattern of attitudes revealed in the Table 5 indicate that traditional regional cleavages have narrowed. The gap between those regions most favourable and least favourable to devolution is only 9 per cent. The figures suggest that a more cohesive Welsh attitude to devolution is emerging across the whole of Wales. There is little regional difference in the preferences for future political developments. The Scottish option, a parliament with law-making and taxation powers wins almost equal support across Wales with the exception of Cardiff which is most sceptical of such a change. However, strongest support is expressed almost equally in north and south; NW Wales with 42 per cent and the Valleys with 43 per cent .

Regional differences are the most in evidence in the allocation of scarce resources. Asked whether the 'Assembly treats all regions in Wales fairly', significant regional differences appeared. The weakest support for the proposition came from north-east Wales, suspicious that the Assembly was merely a vehicle for south Wales interests. The delay by the National Assembly in providing financial support for the British Aerospace factory in Broughton, Flintshire, may have been a factor together with the fact that the coalition cabinet did not contain any AMs from north Wales. For their part, inhabitants of Cardiff were the most likely to consider the Cardiff based Assembly, to be equitable in its treatment of the Welsh regions.

Conclusion

The initial findings are paradoxical. The Assembly no longer divides the nation into eastern and western halves; the territorial cleavage in Welsh politics is weakening. But it is also apparent that the Assembly is seen as operating in a policy-making arena well beyond its capacities, both legal and political; hence the recognition of the importance of its lobbying functions. Whether the gap can be bridged between the ambitious discourse of Welsh politicians and the inherent limitations of executive

devolution is seriously in doubt. However it must be reassuring to Welsh AMs intent on reforming the National Assembly that the Scottish option elicits such support amongst the Welsh public and that there are indications of an underlying mood to challenge the 'hybrid' devolution offered in the referendum.

September 2001

Professor Alistair Cole, J. Barry Jones and Alan Storer, a research team at the Welsh Governance Centre, Cardiff University, commissioned the poll as part of an on-going ESRC funded project on 'Devolution and Decentralisation in Wales and Brittany'. Polling took place from June 18 to 29 with a representative sample of 1,008 adults aged 16 and over and resident in Wales. Polling was by telephone interviews, using the Computer Assisted Telephoning Interviewing system. To ensure a representative sample, interlocking quotas were placed on gender and region. The six regions used were North West Wales (Anglesey, Conwy, Gwynedd); North East Wales (Denbighshire, Flintshire, Wrexham); South-West and Mid-Wales (Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Swansea); Valleys (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath Port Talbot, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Torfaen); South-East Wales (Bridgend, Monmouthshire, Newport, Vale of Glamorgan); and Cardiff. An equal number of interviews was conducted in each region, with the final data re-weighted to reflect the actual distribution of population within Wales. Interviews lasted an average of 10-15 minutes.