

## **The idea of Britishness solved - Wales is where it is at**

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Anthony Barnett (London, OK): If you are at all interested in the fate of Britain read this post - and DON'T stop when you come to a short word beginning with 'W'.

I ran a little summer competition. It asked who has just admitted to a huge release of energy when he realised that the idea of Britishness did not have to entail a unitary state. Rather, it was just a historic moment lasting from 1707 to the 1950s. He then added,

"We need a new sense of what it means to be British. If we remain stuck in the 1950s view we will be in trouble. And if it turns out that we cannot re-invent a new form of Britishness to fit with the needs of the 21st century... then it won't be much of a loss to see it go."

The answer is David Melding a shadow Conservative Party minister for economic development in the Assembly in Wales (Yes, that's the W-word). Gareth Evans got it but he's from Wales. Now read on!

The quote comes from a tremendously interesting booklet by John Osmond of the Institute of Welsh Affairs (and regular OK poster), called Crossing the Rubicon. It's a 50 page history of the negotiations that led to the new coalition in Wales. It is based on private interviews as well as public coverage, with another 60 pages reproducing the three agreements (the initial Stability Pact between Labour and Plaid; the All-Wales Accord between Plaid, the Tories and the Lib-Dems; and the final One Wales agreement for the coalition between Labour and Plaid). Unfortunately Crossing the Rubicon is only available in print - it should be on the web.

If you talk with the London political class about Scotland they will frown and admit there is a problem or get cross and deny it. If you raise the question of Wales bemused indifference follows. But Wales is a harbinger. For example, the first proof that Tony Blair was not what he was cracked up to be and, despite all his talk of being 'modern', didn't understand what it meant to be a contemporary European, took place in Wales with his doomed foisting of Alun Michaels on the principality. (When at the time I talked with Reinhard Hesse, who worked for Germany's Chancellor Schroeder he understood the implications immediately).

Today, as the UK faces its national question, the Welsh process reveals what is going on below the surface of party politics . Here are some snapshots:

**The Labour Party** There are two Labour parties. One is ferociously attached to Westminster and Ukania the other is open-minded and relatively pro-nationalist. In English terms think of the difference between Jack Straw and Ken Livingstone. The difference comes to the fore when Labour loses. Faced with the certainty of being ejected from office by the Rainbow Coalition of Plaid, the Tories and the Lib-Dems, Rhodri Morgan who favours more powers for Wales on the lines of the Scottish model offered and negotiated a coalition with Plaid to the fury of Labour MPs in London. Now roll this forward to an eventual general election that Labour loses. Faced with the choice of permanent opposition or participating in their national politics you can expect Labour defections outside England - and you can also expect the rise of an English brand of Labour within it.

**The Conservative Party** Melding's historic change of heart is significant. Most Tories, indeed most of the London political class, still don't use the term 'unitary state' and have not woken up to its disappearance. But, as John Osmond points out, the Tories are now the leader of the opposition in Wales. Their vote has risen steadily, (15% in 1999, 19% in 2003, 22% this year). It seems the language is a driver for this as they accepted that they had to become a Welsh speaking party or die. A great deal has been written about whether or not Plaid could go into an alliance with the hated Tories who are held responsible for the destruction of mining in Wales. But despite the Conservatives having much the most active blogosphere I've seen little about their debate on making an alliance with the Lib-Dems and the nationalists. John reports that after the Accord was drafted there was a two hour discussion of it with the Shadow Cabinet in London after which it was approved. The Tories understood that a UK-wide re-shaping could be

underway in Wales, "The Welsh Conservatives have determined to project themselves as the Welsh patriotic party, with its own distinctive but positive approach to national identity", is how John reports it. Is possible to have such a patriotism in one country?

The Liberal Democrats The Lib-Dems were the big losers, unable to make up their minds, often disliking the mild nationalism of the agreements they were offered. A tragic decomposition of Lib-Dem nerve and purpose is taking place, a recent article written before Brown's accession by Simon Kovar in *The Liberal* itself was revealing in this respect. Now, the IWA analysis sets out what they have done to themselves in the homeland of Lloyd George. They are ceasing to matter, lacking all ideas.

Plaid Cymru According to John Osmond, they especially 'crossed the rubicon'. No longer can they see themselves as a party of protest, they are now - they had to become - a party of power and government. Have they made the right choice? Should they have chosen to lead a Rainbow Coalition and therefore the government of Wales with a small majority or accept second place to Labour, as they have, thus ensuring its ongoing dominance? John suggests that their leader Ieuan Wyn Jones personally preferred the bolder course and becoming First Minister but he did not have decisive support within the group of Plaid Assembly members who would have split down the middle thanks to a hard core of opposition to making an alliance with the Tories. He therefore chose to keep his Assembly group united rather than risk heading a precarious government with a divided party and a Labour opposition that could claim it was still by far the largest party for whom the people had voted. If Plaid lose their nerve and continue to protest against themselves over a choice that had to cost them either way, they won't make the grade.

What is fascinating is the seriousness, the intensity and detail of the negotiations, the surprises and twists and turns as the parties were locked into a new dynamic that none expected. The context of the new parliament and new relations between the party leaders and especially their younger deputies created a novel politics. The traditional party leaders in London talk about putting the old politics behind them, I wonder how they felt when Wales started to do just that.

Two final details, John's account reveals that it was Peter Hain who came up with the suggestion of a Welsh constitutional convention, demonstrating a Labour capacity for inventiveness and renewal. And one reason why Labour didn't push for a Lib-Dem alliance was because, as Jane Hutt Labour's chief negotiator put it, "We read the blogs the same as everyone else. All the vibes from the Liberal Democrats seemed to us to be negative". People say that coalition politics means fixes behind closed doors. They need not be - but now they can't be. The netroots will insist on being part of any such process. The blogosphere played a directly influential role on a political outcome in the UK for the first time it seems... in Wales.