

## WALES' NEW ELECTORAL MAP OF MANY COLOURS

### John Osmond analyses the results of the Welsh local and Euro elections that took place on 10 June 2004

Last week's council elections produced the most variegated local government map in the history of Welsh electoral politics. Hitherto, the pattern has been one of overwhelming domination - first by the Liberal Party, from the 1880s to the 1920s, and since then by the Labour Party. Now, however, there is power sharing in nine councils across Wales, Labour control in eight, Independents run three, and Plaid Cymru and the Conservatives one each.

Labour rules Newport and the core Valley authorities of Neath Port Talbot, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Merthyr, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen, together with Flintshire in the north east corner of the country. Independents have Ynys Mon, Powys and Pembrokeshire, while the Conservatives control Monmouth and Plaid Cymru Gwynedd.

The remainder of Wales is run by coalitions (see Table 1). The Welsh Liberal Democrats are now the leading party in Swansea, Bridgend and Cardiff; Independents in Conwy, Denbighshire, Wrexham, and Carmarthenshire; and independents with the support of the Liberal Democrats in Ceredigion (although Plaid Cymru are the largest party).

First Minister Rhodri Morgan described these results as "patchy and weird". And certainly it is hard to find a consistent explanation that works across the country. The Liberal Democrat surge along the M4 corridor was attributed by some commentators to voters reacting against the Iraq War and Rhodri Morgan's gaffe in failing to attend the D Day ceremony in Normandy. But if this was so, why did Labour voters seemingly ignore the same issues in neighbouring Rhondda Cynon Taf, Caerphilly and Newport?

Other explanations for the Liberal Democrats' extraordinary success pointed to local issues, such as the closure of the Swansea Leisure Centre, the unpopularity of Labour leaders Russell Goodway in Cardiff and Jeff Jones in Bridgend, or the presence of John Marek's new party, Forward Wales, in Wrexham. Yet local factors are by definition local and cannot explain more general trends.

**Table 1: All-Wales Performance of the Parties in the Council Elections**

PARTY	COUNCILS		COUNCILLORS	
	Total	+ / -	Total	+ / -
<b>Labour</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>478</b>	<b>-64</b>
<b>Plaid</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>-28</b>
<b>Lib Dem</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>+37</b>
<b>Conservative</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>+1</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>+39</b>

What does seem the case is that wherever possible the electorate turned against incumbent administrations, whether Labour in Cardiff, Plaid in Rhondda Cynon Taf, or Independent in

Ceredigion. The explanation for Labour holding on to councils like Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, and Newport may simply be that there was little organised opposition for voters to mobilise around. In Merthyr, for example, the recently formed ‘People before Politics’ grouping won an astonishing nine seats, while in Bridgend a concerted campaign by Independents matched the Liberal Democrats’ seven-seat increase which was enough to wrest control from Labour.

What do the results mean for the political parties? Welsh Labour can take comfort from the fact that they performed much better than in England. Voter discontent on the doorstep was largely linked to UK issues such as the Iraq war and asylum seekers rather than the actual performance of the party in Wales, either at local or Assembly level. Furthermore, compared with Labour’s dismal performance in the European Parliament elections in England – where it came third behind the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats – Welsh Labour did extremely well, topping the poll and increasing its share of the vote compared with 1999 (see Table 2).

**Table 2: European Parliament Election Results in Wales, 2004 and 1999**

PARTY	2004 RESULTS			1999 RESULTS		
	votes	%	seats	votes	%	seats
Labour	297,810	32.4	2	199,690	31.9	2
Conservative	177,771	19.3	1	142,631	22.8	1
Plaid Cymru	159,888	17.4	1	185,235	29.6	2
UKIP	96,677	10.5	0	19,702	3.1	0
Lib Dem	96,116	10.4	0	51,283	8.2	0
Green	32,761	3.5	0	16,146	2.6	0
BNP	27,135	2.9	0			
Forward Wales	17,280	2.8	0			
Christian Democrats	6,871	0.7	0			
Respect	5,427	0.5	0			

At the same time the varied pattern of the Welsh local council map, in contrast to Labour’s complete domination a decade or so ago, tells its own story. Labour now has different fights on its hands in different parts of Wales. In the Valleys it competes with Plaid Cymru; and in the rest of Wales with various combinations of parties. In fact, outside the Valleys Labour faces a collection of parties and independents whose supporters sole shared interest as often as not is to vote tactically against Labour. This suggests that in future Labour will face an uphill task in holding on to Assembly and Parliamentary seats in many parts of the country.

The Conservatives will draw a good deal of comfort from these results. Taking back control of Monmouthshire, and winning seven extra seats in both Conwy and Cardiff suggests it will be well-placed to win Monmouth, Clwyd West and Cardiff North in next year’s Westminster election. It also won second place in the European election, ahead of Plaid Cymru. As their MEP Jonathan Evans concluded, “That, for my party is the first step towards re-establishing ourselves in Wales.”

The main victor in the local elections was, of course the Liberal Democrats. They gained 15 seats in Cardiff, eight in Swansea, seven in Bridgend, seven in Powys, and five in Newport. Their spectacular advance in the capital, in particular winning every ward in the Cardiff Central Westminster constituency, suggests they will be well-placed to win that seat at next

year's general election. However, in other parts of Wales they also lost seats. For instance, in Conwy – long a Liberal Democrat stronghold – the party lost seven seats. And in the European election they were forced into fourth place, on 10.4 per cent (albeit up 2 per cent on 1999), just behind UKIP. A worry for the Liberal Democrats is that they lack a clear focus and – outside their strongholds in Powys and some city wards - remain a vehicle for protest voting.

In many respects the party whose fortunes are most difficult to read from the election results are those for Plaid Cymru. It received a shattering blow in Rhondda Cynon Taf, losing 25 seats to Labour and control of the council. It did less badly in Caerphilly, losing 12 seats, although this was enough for it to lose control. Rhondda Cynon Taf demonstrates how seldom local elections results relate to the actual record of councils. The Plaid Cymru administration had performed creditably, putting the council back on its feet financially and sorting out the literally poisoned inheritance of the Nantygwyddon tip. However, a unique combination of favourable circumstances swept it to power in 1999 and once these were removed, Plaid's relatively shallow purchase on local politics did not prevent it from being swept out again. In Caerphilly, where the party has a longer and deeper record it was better able to withstand the change in fortunes.

In pockets elsewhere Plaid did surprisingly well, for example winning seats in such unlikely places as Caldicot close to the Welsh border in south Monmouthshire, Riverside in Cardiff, Barry in the Vale of Glamorgan, Cockett in Swansea, and Milford Haven in Pembrokeshire. It is also now the biggest party in Ceredigion.

However, a worry for Plaid Cymru is that in the European elections, although it held on to a seat, it was the only party whose total vote compared with 1999 fell in the context of a substantial increase in the turnout. As Carmarthen West MP Adam Price put it, "Plaid Cymru made a massive jump back in 1999 and I think the party has taken some time to build its own capacity in parallel with the support it has gained."

The main message from the June elections – at local and European levels – is that the previously largely monochrome single party dominance of Welsh politics has changed irreversibly. In its place is a more colourful, and more mature map of many colours.

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