

2005 Election Manifestos

The 2005 general election is the second after the introduction of devolution. An analysis of the election manifestos of the five parties represented at the National Assembly reveals the dilemma they face when having to address specifically devolved issues: any party elected at Westminster is powerless to change devolved policy without the agreement of the Welsh Assembly Government. Nevertheless, all five parties have published Welsh manifestos and all, to varying degrees, address devolved issues.

From moral grandstanding to sincere election pledges this is the IWA analysis of the parties' Welsh manifestos. The analysis concentrates on three main issues – health, education and the future of devolution – as well as any other pledges related to devolved subjects.

“Are You Thinking What We’re Thinking?”

Conservatives

The Welsh Conservatives' manifesto adapts the template of its UK manifesto. It repeats the party's eleven word election mantra of “More police, cleaner hospitals, lower taxes, school discipline, controlled immigration, and accountability,” ending with “Are you thinking what we're thinking?”

Health

Says very little about Wales-specific policies; its commitment to increase NHS spending by £34 billion is for the whole of the UK, with Wales presumably getting its share of that increase via the Barnett Formula.

The party has an action plan to reduce waiting lists and to provide cleaner hospitals. It also calls for matrons to be reintroduced to hospitals with the power to close wards for cleaning.

Education

Again, little detail is provided on specifically Welsh education issues. It says that the party's plans to provide an extra £15 billion per year on education by 2009-2010 will mean “more money will be available for education in Wales.”

It says it would empower headteachers and school boards of governors but does not say how it would engage with the Welsh Assembly Government to bring these measures about.

Housing

It would introduce the Right to Buy to housing association tenants.

Devolution

It says that devolution has ‘brought problems of accountability at Westminster.’ In Wales it would hold a referendum on whether to keep the Assembly in its current form, give it further powers or abolish it.

It also says that Scottish MPs would not be able to vote on exclusively Welsh and English issues.

For a party which has surprised political commentators with the way it has fully engaged with the devolution process the dearth of any devolved policy commitment is surprising. Apart from saying that it would work with the National Assembly for Wales the manifesto has very little to say about how a Conservative-led administration would engage with either

the Welsh Assembly Government or the National Assembly. Many of its policies in its manifesto would not be enforceable in the devolved regions; it does not elaborate on which policies are not applicable for those regions - i.e. are for England only.

“Forward Not Back”

Labour

Labour’s manifesto is by far the longest, clocking in at 112 pages. It is mainly a list of the party’s achievements since winning the 1997 election. Like the Conservatives’ it is essentially the UK manifesto with added Welsh elements added.

Promises and pledges on specific Welsh matters are few and far between. Of course, the Labour-run administration in Wales has its own programme and timetable to adhere to. Clear red water should mean that a manifesto for Westminster elections isn’t the place to introduce big policy declarations on devolved issues. However political realities dictate otherwise. Welsh Labour’s policies on the three biggest devolved issues – health, education and devolution itself – reflect this realpolitik.

Health

With NHS waiting lists emerging as a clear concern of voters in Wales it has made Labour MPs – who have no say in the direct running of the NHS in Wales – distinctly uneasy about the election. Whether Jane Hutt’s removal as Health Minister was an indication of some pressure being brought to bear on Rhodri Morgan by his Westminster counterparts is conjecture.

What we do have in their manifesto is a new pledge on waiting lists. It says that by 2009, there will be “no one waiting more than 26 weeks from GP referral to treatment.” The equivalent pledge on the UK manifesto is 18 weeks.

Education

All other parties are quick to point to how they would repeal Labour’s introduction of variable top-up fees for university students in England. In Wales the Rees report has been looking at the options. Labour’s manifesto neatly sidesteps the issue by noting that “Following the completion of the Rees Review we will finalise our plans to increase funding for higher education.”

Devolution

The manifesto makes no explicit reference to the Richard Commission report. However it makes three pledges that clearly relate to the report

- Its pledge to “legislate for a stronger Assembly with enhanced legislative powers” falls short of Richard’s recommendations of a Parliament with full legislative powers.
- It promises to aid accountability within government in Wales by “ending the confusing corporate status of the Assembly,” one of Richard’s recommendations.
- It waxes most lyrical on a promised alteration to proportional representation. It will “prevent candidates from standing on both the list and in a constituency in order to make all candidates genuinely accountable to the electorate and to end Assembly Members being elected via the backdoor even when they have already been rejected by the voters.”

“The Real Alternative”

Liberal Democrats

The Welsh Liberal Democrats’ pre-manifesto document outlines where it would spend more public funds in Wales and how it would raise those funds. It gives more detail than any other party on what it would do for Wales and how it would fund it.

If elected at Westminster the party would

- Scrap tuition and top-up fees for students at a cost in Wales of £65 million a year.
- Introduce free personal care for the elderly and disabled at a cost in Wales of £100 million a year.
- Scrap the council tax and introduce a local income tax at a cost in Wales of £129 million a year.

These measures would be funded by the introduction of a 50% rate on incomes over £100,000 a year. This would contribute some £300 million a year to the Assembly budget.

Health

It calls for “tough political leadership” to ensure that the £3.5 billion health care budget in Wales is better spent. Acting on the Wanless Report within a Welsh Parliament would enable the party to put through these changes. The manifesto identifies delayed transfers of care as a “main contributory factor in increasing waiting times” and calls for a “whole system” approach amongst social services and local health boards to tackle this.

Education

As well as scrapping tuition and top-up fees the party also calls for the abolition of the government’s Child Trust Fund and replace it by spending more in rural and urban schools.

Devolution

At the heart of the Liberal Democrats plans for Wales is empowering the National Assembly with full legislative powers as outlined by the report of the Richard Commission. Wales needs its own Senedd, it says to get “the tools for the job” of improving public services and the economy. These changes would not need the approval of a referendum and would give the Assembly tax-varying powers, subject to a referendum.

It also calls for an eighty-member Assembly elected by STV.

A Finance Commission for the Nations and Regions would provide a needs-based formula to replace Barnett which would “provide a massive boost for public funding in Wales.”

Council Tax

One of the main policies of the Liberal Democrats is the abolition of the council tax, to be replaced by a local income tax based on the ability to pay and run through the Inland Revenue.

Housing

It acknowledges the problem of finding affordable housing in Wales and says it will

- Promote the Homebuy scheme, particularly in areas of high property prices.
- Permit local authorities with high proportions of second homes to require a change of use of application for a property bought as a second home.

- Encourage the use of compulsory purchase orders to acquire land at affordable housing value for social housing development.
- Allow local authorities the discretion to re-classify disused agricultural buildings as housing for “local use.”

“We Can Build a Better Wales” Plaid Cymru

Plaid Cymru’s manifesto contains more preamble but less detail than the Liberal Democrats. The Lib Dems of course harbour ambitions of power at Westminster whereas Plaid doesn’t. Maybe this explains the vagueness of Plaid’s manifesto.

Health

Presents a 12 point action plan to tackle what it calls “the current crisis” within the NHS in Wales, with the intention of reducing hospital waiting lists and waiting times. Among these twelve points are more use of GP surgeries as treatment centres, establishing NHS walk-in centres and diagnostic and treatment centres. As stated at a special meeting of the party in March the recommendations fall short of any use of private health provision. It also calls for free eye tests and dental checks.

Education

The party supports an end to top-up fees for university students, with extra funding for education being made available through the scrapping of the Barnett Formula. Calls for the Welsh baccalaureate to replace A levels.

Devolution

It is committed to a Welsh Parliament with full legislative powers as recommended by the Richard Commission. It says it would implement Richard’s recommendations “at the earliest opportunity” without stating a need for a referendum.

The party still states its commitment to independence in Europe but acknowledges that “such a move could only be taken with the support of the people of Wales expressed through a referendum.”

It also calls for the Barnett Formula to be abolished and for government spending in different parts of the UK to be reviewed, by setting up an independent commission for a needs-based formula for the allocation of public money.

Income Tax and Council Tax

Calls for a progressive tax system, with a greater number of income tax bands and a 50% rate of tax on incomes above £50,000. It also calls for the council tax to be scrapped in favour of a local income tax.

Housing

Drawing on a policy consultation paper it has published on the subject it calls for the following measures

- Empowering local councils to use planning clauses to restrict the percentage of second homes in towns and villages to 25%.
- Affordable homes in all new developments of more than 10 houses.
- Establish Community Land Trusts that could free up publicly owned land for affordable housing.
- More resources into the Assembly's first-time buyers scheme.
- Change stamp duty system, with the average house price being subject to a zero rate but the most expensive homes being subject to up to 8%.

Culture

Says it would introduce a new Welsh Language Bill in the next parliament. Doesn't say whether this would include private sector regulation.

Europe

Wants to boost representation for Wales within EU institutions. Also supports the European Constitution.

Environment

Proclaims that the environment should be at the heart of everything the party does. It reiterates its opposition to GM foods and any new nuclear power stations and calls for Welsh and UK Government policy to include benchmarks for greenhouse gas reductions to reach 60% by 2050.

Calls for congestion charging to be introduced to the main towns and cities of Wales.

It also calls for improvements in north-south transport links and an integrated Welsh transport system.

Rural Affairs and Agriculture

Supermarkets to sign up to a statutory code of conduct to end the exploitation of both farmers and consumers.

Calls for a Milk Ombudsman to protect dairy farmers.

“Listening, Standing Together, Turning Forward”

Forward Wales

Much like Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats Forward Wales points to an “unfair funding formula” in which “every man, woman and child in Wales is being robbed of £5 a week by London.” It would use the receipts of this estimated £800 million a year for “a radical overhaul of the NHS in Wales.”

Health

The radical overhaul means a fully funded NHS free at the point of need, with no waiting lists and the introduction of free and nutritious school meals for children.

Education

In education it calls for

- Scrapping of tuition fees for students.

- School travel to be safer with buses built to US-style “yellow bus” standards.
- Local procurement policies to combat junk food.
- Improving the provision of sports and playing fields.

Devolution

The party calls for the “full implementation of the Richard Commission report.”

Income Tax and Council Tax

It supports the abolition of the council tax in favour of a local income tax and calls for an increase in the higher rate of tax to 50%.

Environment

It calls for the introduction of a set of principles in environmental policies that would “return justice to the global environment.” Amongst these proposals are the transparent spending of tax-payers’ money and the use of the principle of “tax the polluter, reward the non-polluter.”

Economic Development and Culture

The party draws the comparison between economic development, or the lack of it, and the sustainability of Welsh-speaking communities. It says that Labour has not addressed the growing economic disparity between Objective 1 areas and non-Objective 1 areas. This in turn works to “the detriment of Welsh-speaking communities.” The party calls for a sustainable policy of economic and social intervention and the designation of the Welsh-speaking heartland as a European Area of High Cultural Significance.

Housing

One of the major issues where Forward Wales has been campaigning is opposing the large scale transfer of local authority housing stock to newly created housing associations. It was successful in a campaign to withstand its implementation in Wrexham and reiterates its opposition in its manifesto by also calling for councils to be empowered to buy back its sold off housing stock.

Gruffydd Jones

IWA Research Officer