

Assembly Elections May 2007: the Party Performances Analysed

By John Osmond

Labour expected to win at least 27 seats in the May 2007 Assembly election and on that basis planned to carry on running Wales, albeit as a minority administration. In the event they came one seat short of achieving their objective, conceding the fourth list seat in Mid and West Wales to Plaid Cymru by just 500 votes.

However, examine these results from a different perspective and the conclusion must be that Labour was extraordinarily lucky to win 26 seats. The fact that they did reflects the arbitrary, essentially disproportional, character of the Additional Member system of partial proportional representation used to elect the Assembly. Labour now has 43 per cent of the seats on the basis of 31 per cent of the vote (averaged across the constituency and list results).

In all Labour lost six constituency seats, gained one (dissident John Marek's Wrexham) and picked up two on the list in Mid and West Wales. At the same time they came within a handful of votes of losing the Vale of Glamorgan, the Vale of Clwyd and Delyn to the Tories (see Table 1). If they had lost these seats it would have meant a new government within days rather than weeks of the election, with Plaid's Dafydd Wigley being returned on the North Wales list.

An examination of the Welsh constituencies ordered by the majority winning parties achieved (Table 1) reveals a new crop of marginals, most of them Labour's to lose next time. There are now 15 seats which have majorities of less than 2,000, most of them Labour. The exceptions are two held by the Conservatives (Carmarthen West and Pembrokeshire South, and Clwyd West), one by Plaid Cymru (Aberconwy) and one by the Liberal Democrats (Montgomery). Remarkably, of the three safest seats in Wales, two are now held by Plaid Cymru and one by the Conservatives.

This was Labour's worst election result in Wales since 1918. Tables 2 and 3 show how Labour's Assembly vote has steadily declined since 1999. In these calculations it is as important to record the actual votes cast as the percentages, since we are dealing with differential turn-out from election to election. In 2003 Labour's percentage of the constituency vote rose slightly, from 37.6 per cent to 40 per cent. But this was because the turn-out in the election was low, falling from 46 per cent in 1999 to just 38 per cent. As Table 2 makes clear, the actual numbers voting for the party fell substantially, by some 44,136 votes. And in 2007, despite the turn-out increasing to 44 per cent, the numbers voting for Labour fell again, by a further 25,610. Labour's share of the list vote declined even more steeply, as Table 3 shows.

Across the country voters coalesced around whoever had the best chance of defeating Rhodri Morgan's incumbent government. In Preseli Pembrokeshire, Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire, Clwyd West and Cardiff North it was the Tories. In Llanelli, Ceredigion, and Aberconwy it was Plaid Cymru. In Blaenau Gwent it was the Independent Trish Law. Labour might well have lost Caerphilly and Islwyn to Plaid if independents, including devolution architect Ron Davies, had not intervened and split the anti-Labour vote.

Table 1: Welsh constituencies ordered by majority

	Constituency	Party	Majority
1	Vale of Glamorgan	Labour	83
2	Vale of Clwyd	Labour	92
3	Carms West & Pembs South	Conservative	98
4	Delyn	Labour	510
5	Newport East	Labour	875
6	Clwyd South	Labour	1,119
7	Gower	Labour	1,192
8	Wrexham	Labour	1,250
9	Newport West	Labour	1,401
10	Swansea West	Labour	1,511
11	Clwyd West	Conservative	1,596
12	Aberconwy	Plaid Cymru	1,693
13	Caerphilly	Labour	1,937
14	Neath	Labour	1,944
15	Montgomeryshire	Liberal Democrat	1,979
16	Islwyn	Labour	2,218
17	Bridgend	Labour	2,556
18	Cardiff South and Penarth	Labour	2,754
19	Preseli Pembrokeshire	Conservative	3,205
20	Alyn and Deeside	Labour	3,362
21	Pontypridd	Labour	3,387
22	Cardiff West	Labour	3,698
23	Llanelli	Plaid Cymru	3,884
24	Ceredigion	Plaid Cymru	3,955
25	Ynys Môn	Plaid Cymru	4,392
26	Merthyr Tydfil	Labour	4,581
27	Cardiff North	Conservative	4,844
28	Swansea East	Labour	4,961
29	Arfon	Plaid Cymru	5,018
30	Brecon and Radnor	Liberal Democrat	5,354
31	Blaenau Gwent	Independent	5,357
32	Torfaen	Labour	5,396
33	Cynon Valley	Labour	5,623
34	Rhondda	Labour	6,215
35	Cardiff Central	Liberal Democrat	6,565
36	Aberavon	Labour	6,571
37	Ogmore	Labour	7,900
38	Carmarthen East & Dinefwr	Plaid Cymru	8,469
39	Monmouth	Conservative	8,469
40	Dwyfor Meirionnydd	Plaid Cymru	8,868

Table 2**Constituency Vote: 2007, 2003 and 1999 Assembly elections compared**

	2007			2003			1999		
	Votes	%Vote	Seats	Votes	%Vote	Seats	Votes	%vote	seats
Labour	314,925	32.2	24	340,535	40.0	30	384,671	37.6	27
Plaid Cymru	219,121	22.4	7	180,185	21.2	5	290,572	28.4	9
Conservative	218,730	22.4	5	169,842	19.9	1	162,133	15.8	1
Lib Dem	144,450	14.8	3	120,220	14.1	3	137,857	13.5	3
Independents	80,906	8.3	1	40,053	4.8	1	47,992	4.7	0

Table 3**Regional List Vote: 1999 and 2003 Assembly elections compared**

	2007			2003			1999		
	Votes	%Vote	Seats	Votes	%Vote	Seats	Votes	%Vote	Seats
Labour	288,954	29.6	2	310,658	36.6	0	361,657	35.5	1
Plaid Cymru	204,757	21.0	8	167,653	19.7	7	312,048	30.6	8
Conservative	209,153	21.4	7	162,705	19.2	10	168,206	16.5	8
Lib Dem	114,500	11.7	3	108,013	12.7	3	128,008	12.5	3
Others	157,520	16.2	0	130,531	11.8	0	51,938	4.9	0

Labour's share of the vote fell in 39 out of the 40 constituencies. The exception was Cardiff Central where, in second place, the party was three points up on 2003 but still 30 points adrift from the Liberal Democrats' Jenny Randerson. Even in Wrexham, which Labour regained, it fell back three points compared with 2003. Overall Labour saw its percentage vote fall by just under eight points to 32.2 per cent, exactly the same as its share of the constituency vote in Scotland. As Aberystwyth psephologist Roger Scully observed, "This is the first time that Labour's vote share in Wales has NOT been greater than in Scotland since 1924, when they were also on dead level at 40.6 per cent."

How far can Labour's share of the vote decline? There is no doubt that the trend in their vote is downwards while those of their main opponents, the Conservatives and Plaid Cymru, are upwards. The Conservatives benefited from the popularity of David Cameron and favourable coverage in the London press, reflected in strong leads for the party in the UK polls in the run-up to the Assembly election. In May 2007 the Welsh Conservatives arguably came near to maximising their support at 22.4 per cent.

Certainly it is the case that in most seats where they came a close second in 2003 they focused their efforts and their support surged.

There were two exceptions to this analysis which shows how difficult it is to make broad generalisations about an electoral landscape that all too often veers towards localism. The first was Newport East where in an extraordinary result the Liberal Democrats jumped clear of the Conservatives to threaten Labour (of which more below).

The second exception was Carmarthen West and Pembrokeshire South where the Conservatives came from 20.5 per cent and third place in 2003 to win the seat in 2007 with 30 per cent of the vote. No-one was more surprised at this result than the Conservative candidate herself, Angela Burns. An incomer to the area, she had only joined the party a year or so earlier, attracted by the politics of David Cameron. As her website proclaims, “Until now Angela has not considered herself a mainstream politician.” What can account for her victory? Certainly, a major issue in the campaign nationally, the health service, played exceptionally strongly in Pembrokeshire where the election debate revolved around a threat to downgrade Withybush hospital in Haverfordwest. A leaflet widely circulated by the Save Withybush Action Team pressure group during the campaign pronounced, “Whatever our normal political hue we need to make it clear that any threat to our services by any political party will not be tolerated by the voters.”

Plaid Cymru might have expected to benefit from this injunction as well but in Preseli and southern Pembrokeshire it mainly resulted in assisting the mobilisation of Conservative-inclined voters. Plaid Cymru observers in Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire also pointed to the ongoing trend of in-migration into the area.

Overall, across Wales Plaid Cymru achieved exactly the same percentage as the Conservatives in the constituency vote, and fell slightly behind on the list vote. However, unlike the Conservatives Plaid can look to its performance in 1999 when it scored 28 per cent of the constituency vote. Any return to this level of support for Plaid would undoubtedly be mainly at the expense of Labour.

On the face of it Plaid Cymru did well on 3 May 2007. It won three seats, and is clearly established as the second party in the Assembly. Its nightmare was to be overtaken by the Conservatives, a bad dream that failed to materialise. Moreover, all its seats are now held with reasonable majorities. Ahead of the election the new seats in the north-west Wales were branded marginals. In the event Arfon, which embraces Bangor, returned a convincing 5,018 majority for Alun Ffred Jones, while Gareth Jones has a respectable 1,693 majority in the new seat of Aberconwy. Llanelli, which Plaid lost by 21 votes in 2003, has become a safe seat for Helen Mary Jones with a 3,884 majority. Plaid’s strong showing in Ceredigion, where it won convincingly in a straight fight with the Liberal Democrats, means it is now well-placed to win the seat back from them at the next Westminster election.

Other pluses for the party include returning Wales’s first ethnic minority member, Mohammed Asghar, on the list in South East Wales, and also polling a respectable 25 per cent of the poll in Rhodri Morgan’s Cardiff West. Both these results lend weight to Plaid’s claim of being a party for the whole of the country.

On the other hand Plaid Cymru barely increased its overall share of the vote compared with 2003. Some of the blame for this can be placed at the door of the startling rise in votes for Independent candidates, for example Ron Davies in Caerphilly whose strong showing arguably enabled Labour to hold on to the seat. At the same time the salience of the Independents also served to underline the highly localised character of the campaign across much of Wales. It is Plaid Cymru's task to be a major instrument in creating a sense of a national campaign for the country as a whole. Only when it manages to achieve this, arguably with a stronger and more established national leadership, as with Dafydd Wigley in 1999, will it be able to increase its national share of the vote.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats suffered from exaggerating their prospects ahead of the election. They anticipated winning an extra two or even three seats, and so were widely perceived as having done badly when in the event they only managed to retain their existing six. However, a closer examination of the result reveals a rather different picture. In the first place they achieved their highest constituency poll in an Assembly so far, albeit with a modest increase. More significantly, the party polled extremely well in a number of key seats, in particular Swansea West and Newport East, which reflects its success in local elections in these places.

As mentioned earlier, the Liberal Democrats' most remarkable result was in Newport East. Here Ed Townsend, a former journalist who has established himself on the local council, pushed his vote up from 16 to 28 per cent, overtaking the Conservatives and running Labour a close second. Labour fell 12 points and now holds the seat with a majority of just 875 votes, making it a key marginal next time.

The underlying story of this election is what it tells us about the marginals in 2011. As stated at the outset most of these are now Labour's to lose. The one exception is Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire which is now a remarkably narrow three-way split between the Conservatives (30.07 per cent), Labour (29.73 per cent), and Plaid Cymru (29.19 per cent). Here a 100 votes separates each of the parties. In 2011 it will be the Conservatives to lose and more than likely Plaid Cymru's to gain. Elsewhere, all the seats are Labour's to lose, with the Conservatives set to gain, but losing out on the List as a consequence.

The headline story of the election is the end of Labour's overwhelming hegemony of Welsh politics, after nearly a century of enjoying this position. Wales is experiencing a new pluralism in its politics. We may have to wait until the next election in 2011, or even the one after, to see this fully realised. But, I suspect, historians will identify the 2007 election as the watershed in this change.

- John Osmond is Director of the Institute of Welsh Affairs and fought Preseli Pembrokeshire for Plaid Cymru in the 2007 election.