

## Pluralism Enters Welsh Politics

Labour's near century-long domination of Welsh local politics came to an end on May Day 2008. In a set of poor results for the party it lost a swathe of seats and control of six councils, confirming a trend of secular decline that has been underway for the better part of a decade.

The political map of Wales is now spattered with the epithet 'No Overall Control' with coalitions the norm across most of the 22 Welsh counties, as well as in the National Assembly following the 2007 Assembly election.

The implications for Welsh politics, and in particular the country's constitutional development, will be profound. No longer will the key decisions be able to be framed (or privatised, as one commentator recently put it) within one political party, the Labour Party, as has been the case for the past two generations. Instead, the inevitable deals and compromises that will be part of negotiating the future governance of Wales, will be forced into the open, to be debated across the parties. In this sense Wales will at last join what has been common practice across much of the European political world.

The arena where this will be played out in the coming months will be the All Wales Convention, established under the chairmanship of former United Nations emissary Sir Emyr Jones Parry as part of the *One Wales* coalition agreement between Labour and Plaid Cymru in the National Assembly.

The local elections deepened and extended the collapse of Labour's control of local government that began when they were last held in 2004. Four years ago the Liberal Democrats took the initiative in forcing Labour out of power across much of the southern coastal belt, including Swansea, Bridgend and Cardiff, together with Wrexham in the north.

Four years later a combination of other political forces, led in the main by non-party groups, have forced Labour out of power in much of its traditional Welsh heartland territory, including Merthyr, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, and Newport in the south, and Flintshire in the north-east.

Labour now only controls two Welsh counties, Neath Port Talbot and Rhondda Cynon Taf, and will run Bridgend with the help of a couple of Independents, in effect wresting control back from the Liberal Democrats. But even in Rhondda Cynon Taf it lost ground and would probably have fared a good deal worse had Plaid Cymru found more candidates. Eleven Labour councillors were returned unopposed, while Plaid fell 17 short of fielding a full slate of candidates in a council it controlled between 1999 and 2004. As Rhondda's MP Chris Bryant told the Western Mail as the results came in, "Its an anxiety about Labour, an anxiety crisis. We've got to listen and reassure people about the economy."

Across much of Wales Plaid Cymru made solid advances. Perhaps its major success came in Caerphilly which it will now control with the aid of a diverse group of independents, including Ron Davies, the former Secretary of State for Wales who has made a political come-back after a decade in the wilderness (his wife, Lynne Hughes, also won a seat for Plaid Cymru in a neighbouring ward). Plaid Cymru will take over the administration of Ceredigion, as well, with the support of a few Independents and the sole Labour councillor in the county.

**Summary of Welsh 2008 Local Election results**

	Labour		Con		Plaid		Lib Dem		Others		Control
	Seats	+/-	Seats	+/-	Seats	+/-	Seats	+/-	Seats	+/-	
Anglesey	5	+5	2	+1	8	+2	2	+1	23	-9	IND
Blaenau Gwent	17	-8	0	0	0	0	2	0	23	+8	NOC
Bridgend	27	+5	6	-1	1	0	11	-2	9	-2	NOC
Caerphilly	32	-9	0	0	32	+6	0	0	9	+3	NOC
Cardiff	13	-14	17	+7	7	+4	35	+3	3	+1	NOC
Carmarthen	12	-13	0	0	31	+15	1	+1	30	-3	NOC
Ceredigion	1	0	0	0	19	+3	10	+1	12	-4	NOC
Conwy	7	-5	22	+8	12	+1	4	-1	14	-3	NOC
Denbigh	7	0	18	+9	8	+1	1	+1	13	-11	NOC
Flintshire	22	-13	1	0	1	+1	11	+1	26	+7	NOC
Gwynedd	4	-4	0	0	35	-8	0	0	30	+13	NOC
Merthyr	8	-9	0	0	0	0	6	+6	19	+3	NOC
Monmouth	7	-2	29	+5	1	-1	5	+2	1	-4	CON
Neath Port Talbot	37	+1	0	0	11	+1	4	+2	12	-4	LAB
Newport	19	-8	16	+4	2	+1	6	+3	1	0	NOC
Pembs	5	-6	5	+4	5	0	3	+1	42	+1	IND
Powys	4	+4	9	+9	0	0	15	0	45	-9	IND
RCT	45	-12	1	+1	20	+7	4	+2	5	+2	LAB
Swansea	30	-2	4	0	1	-3	23	+3	14	+2	NOC
Torfaen	18	-16	5	+4	3	+3	2	0	16	+9	NOC
Vale of Glam	13	-3	25	+5	6	-2	0	0	3	0	CON
Wrexham	11	-9	5	+1	4	+4	12	+3	20	+1	NOC
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>344</b>	<b>-122</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>+62</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>+33</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>+21</b>	<b>378</b>	<b>+6</b>	

Plaid will also be the lead party in a coalition that will run Carmarthen, after making 15 gains, largely at the expense of Labour in the southern part of the county around Llanelli and also the town of Carmarthen itself. Elsewhere the party picked up seats in previous barren territory such as Wrexham, Flintshire and Torfaen. It made impressive gains in the Welsh capital, too, making it the largest political grouping at local level within Rhodri Morgan's Cardiff West constituency.

Plaid Cymru's advance was checked in its Gwynedd fastness where Llais Gwynedd (Gwynedd Voice), a new group formed in protest at threatened small primary school closures, won 12 seats. However, Plaid remains by some distance the largest party and will probably form a coalition with other Independents.

The Conservatives now controls two councils, Monmouth and the Vale of Glamorgan, and have made significant advances across other parts of Wales. In some instances this has been the result of previous Independent wards showing their true colours, for instance in northern Powys, Conwy and Denbighshire. At the same time the party now has support in some unlikely places such as Torfaen and also won seat in the Rhondda.

With 62 gains across Wales the Conservatives made the most progress of all the parties. It is a far cry from the 1990s when Wales took on the appearance of a 'Tory-free zone'. The coming of the Assembly and proportional representation threw a lifeline to the party and Nick Bourne, their leader in Wales, has seized it with enthusiasm. Indeed, the local election results appeared a clear endorsement of his strategy of engaging positively with the Welsh agenda. In Wales, as their posters proclaim, Conservatives are now *Welsh* Conservatives.

The Liberal Democrats tightened their grip on urban Wales, especially Swansea, Cardiff and Wrexham, and even made a foray into Merthyr, winning six seats there from scratch. They will be especially pleased at strengthening their grip on Cardiff, which had been targeted by Labour. In the capital the Liberal Democrats increased their strength by three seats to a commanding 35, while Labour fell by 13 seats to just 12.

Elsewhere, a mixed bag of Independent councillors stole ground from Labour, especially in Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen and Flintshire. These are a new brand of Independents, a far cry from the traditional 'non-party' stalwarts of rural Wales and still very much alive in Pembrokeshire and Powys. These are highly political urban creatures grown up in Opposition to Labour, whether it be the 'People's Voice' of Blaenau Gwent or the 'People Before Politics' of Merthyr.

The overall picture was one of Labour losing and the other parties and independents gaining. It was as though the slogan for the election was 'Anything but Labour'. The party's previous hegemony meant that despite the blood-letting it remains the party political largest force in Welsh local government, with 344 councillors to Plaid Cymru's 207, followed by 173 for the Conservatives, and 162 for the Liberal Democrats. Nevertheless, henceforth pluralism will be the defining characteristic of Welsh politics.

In the wake of the elections a significant commentary was made by the veteran Labour Peer Lord Gwilym Prys Davies, who was Labour's candidate in the 1966 Carmarthen by-election which saw Gwynfor Evans elected as Plaid Cymru's first MP. He said Welsh politicians had some "very serious questions" to ask themselves about the future direction of Wales. "I take the view that the establishment of the National Assembly has strengthened the consciousness of being Welsh, while the consciousness of being British is weaker," Lord Prys Davies said.

"I happen to believe that in an age when globalisation has swept across the world, weakening the sense of individual national identity, it is very important to have a sense of belonging to an historic nation like Wales. We have to strengthen all the forces that strengthen our awareness of being Welsh.

"It seems to me that in philosophical terms there are three governing elements in the concept of Welshness: the influence of the Welsh language and Welsh culture from the time of Dewi Sant, the influence of Christianity, and the influence of the industrial revolution over the last 200 years. We really need a political vision for Wales that can synthesise all these elements."

- John Osmond is Director of the Institute of Welsh Affairs.