Tell people something they know already and they will thank you for it.
Tell them something new and they will hate you for it.

The Welsh Revolution

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Why are radical politics electable in Wales but not in England?

By George Monbiot. Published in the Guardian 19th April 2010

The lowland meadows are greening up, but the high pastures – the wet deserts of Snowdonia – are still yellow and bleak. A few streaks of snow cling to the mountains; but on the first hot day of the year you can almost hear the relief shuddering up from the ground. Buds imperceptibly unclench. The turbines on the hills stand still for first time in months. Wavelets lip over the shingle - gentle, identical, like a screensaver on the edge of the sea’s white monitor.

And everyone is out of doors. In the rain-sodden lands of west Wales, no one wastes a day like this. Business almost grinds to a halt as mysterious illnesses strike the working population down. Hardy pilgrims dip themselves in the healing waters of Cardigan Bay. The elderly lean on their front doors, eyes closed, faces to the sun.

To Elfyn Llwyd it feels like one big village. Though the reshaped constituency he’s contesting is strung from Bardsey island to the Dyfi Valley, from the post-industrial dystopia of Blaenau Ffestiniog to the deep peace of the Rhinog mountains, though it can take three hours by car to cross from end to end, almost everyone either knows him or knows his face. With the possible exception of my own MP – the ubiquitous and surprisingly effective Lembit Opik - I have never met a backbencher who is so widely recognised in his constituency. Yet I doubt that one in 1000 Londoners knows who he is.

He scarcely needs to campaign for this seat. On some accounts Dwyfor Meirionedd is the safest in Wales. Llwyd took 51% of the vote at the last election, and support for his party is even stronger in the region which has been tacked onto his constituency. But it looks like unpromising territory for politics like his. There is no large town, no deep mining, no steel plant: most people are employed by farms or small businesses. While radical rural politics are familiar in parts of France, Mexico and Brazil, those of us brought up in England associate the countryside with conservatism. Here in the remotest parts of Wales there’s overwhelming support for policies well to the left of Labour’s.

This is the mystery I have come to solve. Why, when the three main parties in Westminster appear to be trapped in a neoliberal consensus, is a green socialist party sharing power in Cardiff? How, even in the first-past-the-post system of Westminster elections, can Plaid Cymru return three MPs with comfortable majorities, with a fair shot at electing a further four? What has Wales got that England hasn’t?

For the past few years a quiet but momentous revolution has been taking place to the west of Offa’s Dyke. That this revolution has passed largely unnoticed in England reflects the London media’s lack of interest in Wales. English progressives know more about the political transformation in Bolivia than the similar shift happening over the border. Perhaps this is just as well. The Welsh have been left to get on with it, and nobody in England cares enough to try to stop them.
It was Plaid Cymru that led the attempt to impeach Tony Blair over the invasion of Iraq. It opposed the conflict in Afghanistan from the outset. It wants to scrap Trident and cancel the aircraft carrier and Eurofighter contracts. It would break up the banks, ban short selling, tax foreign exchange transactions, raise capital gains tax, raise income tax for the rich while reducing it for the poor. It would set a maximum wage and give workers seats on corporate boards. It seeks to re-nationalise the railways and curb the power of the supermarkets. It wants a living pension for everyone over 80, to raise benefits in line with average earnings and to scrap tuition fees. It would abandon ID cards, stop detaining asylum seekers and shift sentencing away from prison and towards restorative justice.

Such policies are widely held to make parties in England unelectable. But in Wales they are considered mainstream, and not just among Plaid supporters. The Labour Party in Cardiff is a different beast to the Labour Party in Westminster. The Welsh Assembly Government, where Labour is the senior coalition partner, has stopped SATs testing in schools, scrapped the private finance initiative, is abandoning the internal market in the NHS, has imposed tough social housing policies, helped set up a network of credit unions and – belatedly - more or less killed new opencast mining. The manifesto Labour has just published for the Westminster vote would be a lengthy suicide note for the Assembly elections. What explains the difference? To try to understand, I spent last Friday trailing Llwyd around his constituency.

He looks like a Victorian cartoon of a policeman: big, burly, with chubby cheeks and a thick moustache. In fact his father was a cop, though Elfyn trained as a barrister. He’s the second MP produced by a tiny legal practice in Porthmadog; the other was David Lloyd George. He’s clubby, uncomplicated, likes his rugby, knows the price of milk. He’s probably the last MP in Westminster to list pigeon breeding as his hobby. I wouldn’t describe him as an intellectual: I sense that he’s more comfortable cracking jokes with his constituents than arguing about ideas. But his job is surprisingly straightforward. Plaid must be the only leftwing party in Europe that, for the past 20 years, has not been split by doctrinal disputes. There is no war between the Welsh People’s Liberation Front and the People’s Liberation Front of Wales. When I asked him why this was he seemed at a loss to explain it.

“I’m not sure really. I suppose we’ve learnt from other people’s mistakes. We don’t have a tight system of party discipline. I think you could say we’re driven by an ideology.”

The lack of party discipline became clear as we talked. After he said some robust things about supermarkets, I asked him why Plaid had allowed Tesco to sponsor its conference last year.

“I refused to attend the Tesco event. I’ve had words with my party about it: perhaps we’ll ask Saddam to sponsor it next year.”

I told him that I was surprised, in these days of fierce whipping, that he could make such unguarded statements.

“I think I’m entitled to a personal opinion from time to time. We’re not a control freak party to be honest.”

This too appears to distinguish Plaid from what Llwyd calls the London parties. Its selection of candidates and decision-making processes appear more open than those of Labour or the Conservatives. Its small size makes this easier, so does the sense of solidarity in Wales: a gradual emergence from colonisation has bolstered a national identity that’s lacking in England. That said, I have found no evidence to support the Guardian’s claim that Plaid veers “very close to hatred of the English”. Even its Welsh language policy looks pretty modest: it seeks not primacy but equal status with English. This is good politics: there are, if it can reach them, plenty of votes to be gathered among the goodlifers who have drifted over the border.
When I first asked why a radical party could succeed in Wales, Llwyd replied instantly, as if the answer were obvious. Proportional representation had created space for a politics inhibited by Middle England. “Not the actual people of Middle England but the idea of it. First-past-the-post politics means that you are always chasing those swing votes in marginal constituencies.”

But, I argued, while this might explain why Plaid does well in Cardiff, it doesn’t explain its success in Westminster elections.

“Traditionally Welsh people belong to the left. There’s a deep and ingrained sense of fair play. They want to see people being looked after. The University of Bangor was built on donations from quarrymen, earning a pittance because they wanted a better future for their children.”

As we walked over the sand at Borth-y-Gest, an old fishing village where children splashed around on the last day of the holidays, he told me about a local farm whose tenants were about to be evicted because the farmer had been killed in an accident. The neighbouring farmers clubbed together and told the landlord they would look after the husbandry until the oldest boy turned 18. “Perhaps it’s a result of living in a sparsely populated area. We help each other because we know each other.”

I saw some evidence of that in the business we visited. Harlech Foodservice is a hard-nosed local wholesaler confronting much bigger competitors. Yet, as we were shown round the warehouses and shivered in the frozen food store, the boss kept returning to its local sourcing policy. It would have been easier and probably cheaper to have paid a big firm for a “turnkey” building (they build it then give you the keys), but Harlech decided to supervise the construction of its new headquarters itself, to allow local firms to do the building, wiring and plumbing. It also uses local food suppliers as much as it can. “It all helps the local economy,” the boss explained, “as well as giving us a point of difference from our competitors.”

It struck me that there must be more to it than this though. A couple of times, as we drove around the constituency, Llwyd complained about the absence of Welsh newspapers (there’s no equivalent of the Herald or the Scotsman here) and the lack of interest from the London papers. But might that be a good thing? The media prides itself on being a democratising force, but in reality doesn’t it limit democratic choice by attacking any party that steps over the line? Isn’t that one of the reasons why Labour was neutered? He pondered this for a moment.

“Yes, I see your point now. It does give us more freedom.” He told me that the Sun had lambasted his stand on Afghanistan, published his phone number and told people to ring him. “I only got two phone calls and both of them said ‘good on you’. People don’t take the Sun very seriously round here.”

But there’s no question that, as Llwyd claims, devolution and electoral reform have been decisive factors in the Welsh revolution. They have created a culture of political responsiveness that’s mostly lacking in England. Politics in Wales is closer to the people; politicians are forced to listen. Perhaps in England too there is a peaceful revolution waiting to be unleashed, but with a parliament in which Welsh, Scottish and Irish MPs can be drilled through the lobbies to vote on purely English matters, where grass-roots politics are continually thwarted by dodgy voting systems, ruthless party machines and antediluvian powers, the box in which it lurks remains firmly nailed down.

The English like to think of themselves as a modern and sophisticated nation, and sometimes ignorantly view the Welsh as backward and uncouth. But as far as democracy is concerned, the English are lightyears behind. Westminster has far more to learn from Cardiff than Cardiff has from Westminster.