

‘A Slippery Slope?’ The Impact of Scottish Independence on Wales

Written by Mari Elin Wiliam

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MARI ELIN WILIAM, OCT 29 2012

In evidence to the McKay Commission on Devolution in July 2012, Kim Howells, former Labour MP for Pontypridd, expressed his opposition to an English Parliament by saying that ‘we are a long way down the slippery slope to the breakup of Britain’.[1] At various junctures during the devolution debate in Britain critics have warned that the gradualist spectre of independence looms ever closer with each step that cedes power from Westminster. Of course, for nationalist supporters of independence this is an issue to be celebrated, and explains why the agreement on an autumn 2014 Scottish independence referendum (signed by Prime Minister David Cameron and First Minister Alex Salmond on 15th October 2012) has spawned a debate on its implications for the whole notion of ‘Britain’ and its future composition.[2]

Plaid Cymru [The Party of Wales] and Scottish Independence

Immediate parallels have been drawn with the Welsh context. Leanne Wood, the leader of Plaid Cymru, illustrated this by saying that ‘The future of Scotland is a matter for the Scottish people to decide, just as the future of Wales is a matter for the people of Wales’. Plaid’s role would be to ensure that Wales was not left trailing in the wake of Scottish constitutional changes in 2014, and that the Welsh could also ‘move ahead’.[3] Plaid Cymru AM (*Assembly Member*) Simon Thomas similarly referred in the *Senedd* (‘Parliament’) in Cardiff to ‘the historic Edinburgh agreement’, and noted that Plaid was ‘pleased’ about the referendum on Scottish independence.[4] However, when the Labour First Minister Carwyn Jones mooted the idea of providing a home for Britain’s nuclear submarines in Wales were they evicted from an independent Scotland, this raised considerable ire in Plaid circles.

Plaid Cymru’s official stance is to call for Welsh independence within Europe. This was overwhelmingly supported at the October 2011 party conference, and whilst it may seem a relatively straightforward issue for a nationalist party, the ‘i’ word has been a controversial one within Plaid. In 1999, the then leader Dafydd Wigley claimed that Plaid Cymru had never advocated independence for Wales, and one of the party grandees, Dafydd Elis-Thomas, pronounced in 2011 that ‘independence’ was a mirage for Wales.[5] In an ITV/You Gov poll in February 2012 when asked whether or not Wales should become independent from the rest of the United Kingdom following a ‘Yes’ vote in Scotland, only 33% of Plaid Cymru constituency voters were prepared to support this.[6] So, it could be argued at present that an independent Wales is a minority viewpoint even amongst the ‘nationalist’ electorate.

Historically, this is not as surprising as it may seem at first glance. The Welsh Nationalist Party (later renamed Plaid Cymru) was founded in 1925, and during the interwar years it called for enough ‘freedom’ to preserve Welsh culture and language, but did not advocate outright political ‘independence’.[7] This was reflected in the party’s policy of calling for ‘Dominion’ status for Wales within the British Commonwealth, and the increasing emphasis since the 1970s on Wales’s place in the wider context of European federation.

Plaid Cymru, although established almost a decade prior to the Scottish National Party and working closely with it at Westminster, has been far less successful at the ballot box. Partly this is due to the challenges for Plaid of projecting itself as a political party representing the whole of Wales, as opposed to being a factional language pressure group. Gwynfor Evans’s much heralded by-election victory in 1966 to become the first Plaid Cymru MP was followed by

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Winnie Ewing’s triumph for the SNP in Hamilton in 1967 [The SNP had also briefly held a constituency seat in 1945]. However, whilst the SNP reached a peak of 11 MPs in the October 1974 General Election, the most MPs Plaid have secured in one parliamentary term is 4.

But, the most striking divergence in the parties’ electoral performances has occurred in the post-1999 Welsh and Scottish elections. The 1999 Assembly Election result [when Plaid secured 17 out of 60 seats and 29.5% of the vote to become the second largest party in the inaugural Assembly] was in many ways a false dawn. In 2003 it lost almost 10% of its share of the vote, and although it regained ground in 2007 and formed the ‘One Wales’ coalition government with Labour, it did not return to its 1999 position. Indeed, in 2011 Plaid suffered its worst ever Assembly performance, winning only 11 seats, which placed it in third place behind a resurgent Conservative Party.

Meanwhile, in Scotland the SNP has capitalised on devolution, climbing from being the official opposition in 1999 to forming the Scottish Government in 2007. In 2011 it managed the feat of forming the first majority Scottish Government within a partially proportional electoral system.

There are many factors inherent in these contrasting fortunes. For example, in Wales devolution has enabled Labour and the Conservatives to exhibit their ‘Welsh-friendly’ credentials, whilst Plaid has also failed to benefit from the type of charismatic leadership provided by Alex Salmond for the SNP in Scotland.

Welsh Nationhood and Identity

However, there are more complex issues at work here than merely the governance and personalities involved in the two nationalist parties. A book published in the aftermath of the ‘yes’ votes in the Welsh and Scottish 1997 devolution referenda posed the question *Scotland and Wales: Nations Again?*[8] Of course, whilst there are inevitable similarities between both ‘Celtic’ nations – with Wales and Scotland core to the debates surrounding British ‘internal colonialism’ in the 1960s and 1970s[9] – fundamental differences in their constitutional histories and nationhood mean that an independent Scotland would not necessarily lead Wales down the route to independence.

These have their roots in the respective Acts of Union which joined Wales and Scotland with England. Whilst the 1536 and 1543 Acts to legally join Wales and England tended to subsume native institutions (termed at times acts of ‘incorporation’ instead of ‘union’, and leading to the non-representation of the Welsh dragon on the Union Jack), Scotland is deemed to have entered the union on a more equal footing. After all, a union of monarchies had occurred in 1603 when James VI of Scotland also became England’s first Stuart king. The 1707 Treaty which created the United Kingdom of Great Britain derived from the Scottish Parliament deciding to cede sovereignty from Edinburgh, and to vote itself out of existence. As Christopher A. Whatley has stated, ‘In some respects union was settled on England’s terms, but much was conceded to satisfy the Scots. Union also served what its Scottish supporters reckoned were Scotland’s strategic interests’.[10]

The most important outcome of this was that Scotland managed to retain separate laws, institutions and its own legal system following the Act of Union. Due to this it managed to establish a structure of administrative devolution much earlier to Wales. For example, the first post of Secretary of State for Scotland was established in 1885, which was promoted to being a Cabinet post in 1892. The first Minister of Welsh Affairs was not appointed until 1951, and a Cabinet status for a Secretary of State for Wales was not implemented until 1964. Congruently, the Scottish Office was able to lobby effectively for the interests of Scotland in jurisdictions from education to agriculture decades before the Welsh Office established a civil service administration for Wales in Cardiff.

There are also important cultural distinctions between Welsh and Scottish identities. According to the 2001 Census, only 2% of the Scottish population had some Gaelic language ability, whilst in Wales 20.8% claimed to speak Welsh. The vernacular, its decline and its preservation forms a much stronger thread in Welsh nationhood than it does in Scotland, with an opinion poll in 1966 showing over 70% of respondents feeling it was important to preserve the Welsh language and Welsh traditions. Tanner and Edwards have suggested that this was a sign of a cultural identity which extended beyond the Welsh-speaking ‘heartlands’ of Wales in the rural north and west of the country.[11] Indeed, the strength of cultural nationhood in Wales could be seen as a factor in the ambivalence and rejection of

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devolution in Wales in 1979. Only 22% of the people who identified themselves as 'Welsh' voted 'yes' in 1979, suggesting that they did not see increased Welsh 'governance' a factor in reinforcing their nationality and nationhood. Welsh speakers were often as suspicious as non-Welsh speakers of devolution, although the Welsh language was increasingly becoming political football during the 1970s. The 'no' campaign in 1979 stoked the fear that devolution would lead to an all-Welsh speaking Assembly in Cardiff, and that non-Welsh speakers would be treated as second class citizens.

Because Plaid Cymru has been defined to a much greater degree than the SNP by language preservation, it has been associated with a narrower segment of the electorate, and has often failed to appeal in Labour-dominated industrial and urban areas.

Referenda Results

By looking at the 1979 and 1997 referenda results it can be seen that Scotland has progressed much further along the devolutionary trail than Wales. In 1979, whilst only 20.3% voted in favour of the proposals to create a Welsh Assembly, in Scotland a narrow majority voted 'yes' [although this was below the 40% of the electorate threshold set by the Government, and so devolution was not implemented there either]. However, during the 1980s and 1990s polls on constitutional preferences in Wales saw an increase from 12% in favour of the creation of a Welsh Assembly in 1983 to 50% in 1994/6. During the same timeframe those calling for an independent Wales increased from 6% to 16%.^[12] Whilst agitation with Thatcherite and Conservative governance were factors in these increases (reflected in the fact that no Conservative MPs were elected in Wales in 1997), there remained considerable uncertainty as to whether Wales would support the 1997 devolution proposals. Even though the referenda in Wales and Scotland were to be held during the 'new Labour' honeymoon, it was felt that the afterglow of an almost certain Scottish approval for devolution would benefit the Welsh 'yes' campaign. Whilst the 50.3% who eventually voted for a tentative 'yes' in Wales (a week later than Scotland) seemed very marginal compared to the 74.3% in favour of a Scottish Parliament, as Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully suggest, the swing from 1979 was much more striking in Wales (22.7% compared to 30.0%).^[13]

However, the greater maturity of Scottish self-governance was reflected in the fact that it was to have a Parliament (not an Assembly), and that its voters were also offered the choice of approving tax-raising powers (accepted by 60.2%). Since then, Wales has seen an incremental increase in the powers invested in Cardiff: encapsulated in the 2011 Referendum on giving primary law-making powers to the Assembly. With 63.5% voting in favour of greater devolution, along with support in counties that had overwhelmingly rejected devolution in 1997, it suggests that the Assembly has been accepted into the fabric of Welsh governance.

An Independent Wales?

It must also be kept in mind that although support for greater devolution of powers to Wales is certainly evident, there is no correlation in terms of increased support for independence. Richard Wyn Jones has stated that there is 'no trend in favour of independence for Wales', ^[14] with a BBC Wales/ICM poll on March 1st showing only 7% of the Welsh population in favour of independence, raising to 12% if Scotland became independent.^[15] At the moment, the debate in Wales is focused on the issue of devolving tax-raising powers, with the Silk Commission due to report on devolved government and funding issues in the spring of 2014. In July 2012, 64% of people supported giving tax-raising powers to the Welsh government, so this seems to be the next logical step for Wales.

Of course, if Scotland were to become independent, wider constitutional issues would come to the fore. The First Minister Carwyn Jones, has already expressed deep concern about Wales's role in a 'little Britain', i.e. one where England would become ever more dominant with the secession of Scotland. Within that scenario, and even with the loss of the 2014 referendum in Scotland, it is quite possible that a more federal model of governance will be adopted in Britain.

So, with the historical legacy in mind, independence for Scotland would not inevitably lead Wales further down the 'slippery slope' to independence, although it might well instigate a 'break-up of Britain' into component, federal parts.

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[1] *The McKay Commission – Commission on the consequences of devolution for the House of Commons*, transcript of Cardiff University oral evidence session, 24 July 2012, p. 15, <http://tmc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/120724-TMC-Cardiff-transcript-final.pdf>.

[2] *Agreement between the United Kingdom Government and the Scottish Government on a referendum on independence for Scotland*, Edinburgh, 15 October 2012, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Agreement-final-for-signing.pdf>.

[3] Plaid Cymru, 'The Party of Wales welcomes the Edinburgh Agreement', 15 October 2012, <http://www.english.plaidcymru.org/news/2012/10/15/the-party-of-wales-welcomes-the-edinburgh-agreement/>

[4] The National Assembly of Wales, *The Record of Proceedings*, 16 October 2012, p. 4, <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-chamber-fourth-assembly-rop/rop20121016qv.pdf?langoption=3&ttl=The%20Record%20%28PDF%2C%20938KB%29>

[5] 'Dafydd El: Fydd Cymru byth yn annibynnol', *Golwg 360*, 8 September 2011, <http://www.golwg360.com/newyddion/cymru/48857-dafydd-el-fydd-cymru-byth-yn-annibynnol>

[6] You Gov/ITV Wales results, 'Welsh Regional Vote', 8 February 2012, http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/5y1m6bm8n2/YG-Archives-Pol-ITWales-Results-080212.pdf

[7] See for example Saunders Lewis, *Egwyddorion Cenedlaetholdeb/Principles of Nationalism* (1926).

[8] B. Taylor and K. Thomson (eds), *Scotland and Wales: Nations Again?* (Cardiff, 1999).

[9] M. Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British national development, 1537-1966* (London, 1975); R. J. Hind, 'The Internal Colonial Concept', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26:03 (July 1984), pp. 543-568.

[10] C. A. Whatley, 'The Making of the Union of 1707: History with a History', in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Scotland and the Union 1707-2007* (Edinburgh, 2008), p. 35.

[11] A. Edwards and D. Tanner, 'Defining or Dividing the Nation? Opinion Polls, Welsh identity

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and devolution, 1966-79’, *Contemporary Wales*, 18 (2006), p. 57.

[12] Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully, *Wales Says Yes. Devolution and the 2011 Welsh Referendum* (Cardiff, 2012), p. 63.

[13] Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully, *Wales Says Yes. Devolution and the 2011 Welsh Referendum* (Cardiff, 2012), p. 65.

[14] Professor Richard Wyn Jones, ‘Wales ‘debating more powers not independence’’, *Today*, Radio 4, 18 February 2012.

[15] BBC Wales/ICM Poll, 1 March 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-17212309>