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‘A VERY MODERN KIND OF ENGLISH LONELINESS’: JOHN REDWOOD, THE  
WELSH OFFICE AND DEVOLUTION

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**Abstract:** John Redwood was appointed Secretary of State for Wales in 1993. He pursued a radical right-wing agenda for two turbulent years before resigning to unsuccessfully challenge John Major for the premiership. This article examines this period to make two arguments. One is that Redwood’s imposition of a morally-charged Thatcherite agenda challenged and inadvertently discredited the Conservatives and the institutions through which they governed. This loss of credibility then enabled his opponents to magnify pre-existing discontent and secure a narrow victory in the 1997 referendum. The other argument is that Redwood’s period in Wales demonstrates the counterproductive potential of ideological dedication. His plan to overthrow the prime minister failed, he damaged his party and helped facilitate devolution, outcomes that were the opposite of his intentions.

The overnight count of the referendum on devolution of 18 September 1997 was dramatic. Those in favour of devolution were initially confident of victory, but as the results for individual counties were declared their opponents built up a narrow lead. Tension mounted as both sides waited for the deciding declaration, from Carmarthen. This result was decisively in favour and those supporting devolution were victorious overall, securing 50.3 per cent of votes on a 50.2 per-cent turn-out, a majority of 6,721 votes from the 1.1 million cast. The minuscule majority led Leighton Andrews, co-founder and deputy convenor of the ‘Yes for

Wales' cross-party campaign, to argue that the 'real story [of the referendum] was that Wales voted yes at all'.<sup>1</sup>

The narrow majority was, nevertheless, a large swing when compared to the 1979 referendum, when devolution was supported by only 20.3 per cent of votes cast. Despite the scale of this defeat, devolution gradually reappeared as a political topic from the late 1980s against a backdrop of economic turbulence and opposition to the policies of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative governments, but debate was subdued. However, the Conservative Party in Wales, and the Welsh Office, the institution through which the party governed, suddenly lost credibility in the mid-1990s and devolution gained momentum. The Conservatives collapsed electorally in Wales, presaging the result of the 1997 general election when they failed to win any seats on their lowest share of the vote since 1918 while the Welsh Office was derided as a symbol of constitutional inequity.

The diminished status of the Welsh Office and the Conservatives coincided with John Redwood's tenure as the cabinet-level Secretary of State for Wales between 1993 and 1995 and its aftermath. Redwood was a very unlikely Secretary of State for Wales as although he was not the first whose parliamentary seat was in England, he was the first from the right of the Conservative Party whose views were at odds with majority opinion in Wales. His short period in office was turbulent as he reformed public administration and reduced expenditure, mapping out a firmly right-wing agenda across economic, administrative and moral issues. Political differences were accentuated by a public lack of empathy for Welsh sensitivities,

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<sup>1</sup> Leighton Andrews, *Wales Says Yes: the Inside Story of the Yes for Wales Referendum Campaign* (Bridgend, 1997), p. 7.

hierarchies and institutions, leading to his characterization by contemporary commentators as ‘an exotic specimen in an alien habitat’.<sup>2</sup>

There is no consensus in the secondary literature as to why popular opinion on devolution shifted between 1979 and 1997. Martin Johnes, for example, argued that the electoral swing was largely caused by Labour voters switching to support devolution, but ‘why that happened was less clear’.<sup>3</sup> While more recent literature is sparse,<sup>4</sup> the referendum and the subsequent establishment of the National Assembly for Wales prompted studies of the circumstances that enabled devolution.<sup>5</sup> These studies identified three overlapping causal factors: a reaction against the social and economic impacts of Thatcher’s governments; territorial elites pursuing gradualist strategies for institutional change; and reaction against the Welsh Office being monopolized by a party that secured only a minority of votes in Wales.

While these three causal factors undoubtedly existed and had a crucial role in changing electoral attitudes towards devolution, they do not explain fully the shift in opinion. The first factor of reaction against Thatcher was fuelled by the severe economic and political turbulence that characterized the 1980s, symbolized by the 1984-85 miners’ strike.

Nevertheless, many communities benefited from economic growth from the late 1980s and in

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<sup>2</sup> Kevin Morgan and Geoff Mungham. *Redesigning Democracy, the Making of the Welsh Assembly* (Bridgend, 2010), p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Johnes, *Wales since 1939* (Manchester, 2012), p. 416.

<sup>4</sup> One exception is: Leon Gooberman, ‘Welsh Office exceptionalism, economic development and devolution, 1979 to 1997’, *Contemporary British History*, 30, 4 (2016), 563-83.

<sup>5</sup> J. Barry Jones and Dennis Balsom (eds), *The Road to the National Assembly for Wales* (Cardiff, 2000); Andrews, *Wales Says Yes*; Morgan and Mungham. *Redesigning Democracy*; Bridget Taylor and Katarina Thompson (eds), *Scotland and Wales: Nations Again?* (Cardiff, 1999).

1992 the average unemployment rate in Wales fell below the UK average for the first time since official records began. While relative prosperity bypassed areas that were affected most by deindustrialization, growth meant that the political salience of earlier economic disruption reduced in much of Wales. Importantly, the common narrative of Thatcher's undoubted unpopularity obscures the fact that her party's vote share in Wales fell only marginally, from 32.2 per cent in 1979 to 29.5 per cent in 1987.<sup>6</sup> The retention of this minority share enabled the Conservatives to retain an organizational and representative foothold in Wales, and avoid electoral collapse until the mid-1990s, some years after Thatcher's resignation.

As for the second causal factor, administrative and political elites were far from united in supporting devolution by the early 1990s. Labour elites in Wales and London often lacked enthusiasm for devolution as, for example, did Neil Kinnock, MP for Islwyn and UK party leader until 1992. The lack of enthusiasm reflected long-running internal conflicts arising from what James Griffiths, Labour's first Secretary of State for Wales, described as 'the contrary pulls of country and cause'.<sup>7</sup> Labour's defeat at the 1987 election, however, prompted a gradual reconsideration. The party supported devolution by the 1992 general election but did so with little enthusiasm.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, administrative elites were comfortable

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<sup>6</sup> Roger Awan-Scully, 'The history of one-party dominance in Wales, Part 2: Labour hegemony' [online], available at <https://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/electionsinwales/2013/10/09/the-history-of-one-party-dominance-in-wales-part-2-labour-hegemony/> [accessed on 9 February 2019].

<sup>7</sup> H.T. Edwards, *Hewn from the Rock* (Cardiff, 1967), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Morgan and Geoff Mungham, 'Unfinished business, Labour's devolution policy', in Morgan and Mungham (eds), *The Road to the National Assembly for Wales*, pp. 28-49 (34-35). See also: Lee Waters, 'From little acorns: the fall and rise of devolution in the Wales Labour Party, 1979-1995' (unpublished BA dissertation, Aberystwyth University, 1998). Available at: <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/wgc/files/2014/04/From-little-acorns-lee-waters.pdf> [accessed on 9 February 2019].

with the consensual style of governance adopted by Conservative Secretaries of State and had little self-interest in constitutional change. While the final causal factor – reaction against the Welsh Office being monopolized by a Conservative Party securing only a minority of votes in Wales – remained prominent in debate, there was limited clamour for constitutional change outside political circles by the early 1990s. All this meant that there was no inexorable movement towards devolution and much of the electorate was largely indifferent.

Against this background, this article makes two arguments. One is that the political salience of all three causal factors was suddenly and unexpectedly heightened by Redwood's unsuccessful attempt to impose a morally-charged Thatcherite vision on Wales. His behavior discredited the Conservative Party and the constitutional settlement symbolized by the Welsh Office. This dynamic enhanced pre-existing criticism of both institutions, thereby gifting supporters of devolution sufficient momentum to ensure a narrow victory while simultaneously discrediting and demoralizing their opponents. The other argument is that Redwood's achievement was entirely inadvertent, demonstrating how ideological dedication can generate counterproductive outcomes. His plans to use Wales as a base from which to overthrow the Prime Minister failed, he damaged his party, ended his ministerial career and helped facilitate devolution, outcomes that were the opposite of his intentions.

#### THE WELSH OFFICE BEFORE JOHN REDWOOD

Wales barely existed as a unit of governance until the creation of the cabinet-level post of Secretary of State for Wales in 1964.<sup>9</sup> The Secretary of State was assisted by Ministers of

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<sup>9</sup> Ted Rowlands, 'Whitehall's last stand: the establishment of the Welsh Office', *Contemporary Wales*, 6 (2004), 39–52 (39).

State to oversee the Welsh Office, a new department responsible for housing, local government and roads. The number of people employed at the Welsh Office doubled in the 1970s as it acquired further responsibilities, creating agencies that included the Welsh Development Agency (WDA) and the Development Board for Rural Wales. Despite Thatcher's centralizing tendencies, the responsibilities and autonomy of the Welsh Office remained intact after 1979. This retention of status was partly due to the political personalities of the three Secretaries of State between 1979 and 1993; Nicholas Edwards (1979-87); Peter Walker (1987-9) and David Hunt (1989-93). They adapted their profile and policies to accommodate the dominant political culture in Wales, one that combined aspects of socialism with civic nationalism, and the Welsh Office came to be seen as a retreat for politicians tending towards a more 'One Nation' approach to Conservatism.<sup>10</sup>

Although the political culture of Wales was far from monolithic, there were clear cultural differences between Wales and the Conservative heartlands in England. The first indicator of difference was that an industrial economy once dependent on resource-based industries such as steel, tinplate, coal and slate had created a more collective approach to social and political issues. This more collective approach was reflected by the electoral strength of the Labour Party and the legacy of once powerful trade unions such as the National Union of Mineworkers. The second was the survival of the Welsh language, the focal point for a vocal nationalist movement. The final indicator was long-term economic problems. The industrial economy collapsed in the 1930s before being reconstructed by state interventions after 1945, but struggled in the 1980s when cutbacks to the nationalized coal and steel industries added to large-scale job losses in manufacturing. Economic turbulence prompted political upheaval,

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<sup>10</sup> Morgan and Mungham, *Redesigning Democracy*, p. 64.

and Nicholas Edwards recalled the period as ‘simply grim years when everything sort of piled on everything ... I was sort of struggling my way through rioting crowds’.<sup>11</sup> These differences spurred Conservative Secretaries of State after 1979 to adopt a relatively sensitive and consensual approach. While all broadly supported the policy thrusts of central government, they diluted the impact of such policies in Wales through working in partnership with political opponents, defusing tensions around the Welsh language, and offsetting deindustrialization through intervention of an intensity not favoured by central government.<sup>12</sup>

By 1993 government responsibilities in Wales divided into three overlapping types. First, the Welsh Office was solely responsible for health, education, agriculture, roads and local government. Its £6 billion budget in 1992-3 amounted to 55 per cent of identifiable public expenditure in Wales, rising to 90 per cent if central government’s social security responsibilities were removed.<sup>13</sup> Budgetary scale and reach meant that the Welsh Office was the expression and means of government in Wales for most domestic purposes.<sup>14</sup> Central government funded the Welsh Office through an annual ‘block grant’, which the Secretary of

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Edwards, Duncan Tanner and Patrick Carlin, ‘The Conservative Governments and the Development of Welsh Language Policy in the 1980s and 1990s’, *Historical Journal*, 54 (2011), 529–51; Author’s interview with Nicholas Edwards, Conservative MP for Pembroke (1970–87), Secretary of State for Wales (1979–87), 14 December 2011.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Peter Walker argued that ‘the big attraction of the Welsh Secretary’s job was that I was told [by Thatcher] that “I could do it my way”’. Peter Walker, *Staying Power – An Autobiography* (London, 1991), 202; Leon Goberman, *From Depression to Devolution, Economy and Government in Wales, 1934-2006* (Cardiff, 2017), pp.113-149.

<sup>13</sup> Welsh Office, *Welsh Economic Trends 16* (Cardiff, 1995), pp. 94-6.

<sup>14</sup> J. Barry Jones. ‘Changes to the government of Wales, 1979-1997’, in Jones and Balsom (eds), *The Road to the National Assembly for Wales*, pp. 15-28 (19).



State could then allocate to his own priorities. Second, the Welsh Office shared responsibilities with Westminster over regional policies created to reduce economic imbalances. Finally, the Welsh Office had no responsibilities for tax and monetary policies, social security and nationalized industries.

The Secretary of State's autonomy enabled policy experimentation, summarized in 1993 by Peter Walker as: 'you are master of your own domain. Minister for housing, industry and agriculture. Minister for everything. You have your own budget and you set your own priorities. It is a great training ground. Effectively, you are a mini-Prime Minister.'<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, even as Conservative governments of the 1980s were secure on the UK level, a 'democratic deficit' emerged in Wales to create a hostile environment for their Secretaries of State.

#### THE 'DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT'

The so-called 'democratic deficit' had two components, one of which was a steady decline in the Conservative Party's elected representation after 1983. The party won eleven of the thirty-six MPs elected in Wales at the 1979 general election, rising to fourteen of thirty-eight in 1983.<sup>16</sup> Decline then set in and the number fell to eight in 1987 and six in 1992, while after 1987 the Conservatives were forced to turn to MPs representing English seats for Secretaries of State for Wales. Nevertheless, the Conservative share of the vote fell only slightly between 1979 and 1992, and the declining number of their MPs was largely attributable to Social

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<sup>15</sup> *The Times*, 29 May 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Denis Balsom. 'Political Developments in Wales, 1979-1997', in Jones and Balsom (eds), *The Road to the National Assembly for Wales*, pp. 5-14 (10).

Democratic Party/Liberal Party Alliance supporters returning to Labour. The other component was created by the Welsh Office's approach to service delivery, as much of its activity was policy based. Public services were delivered instead by local authorities or Non-Departmental Government bodies. The latter were known as Quangos (Quasi-Autonomous Nongovernmental Organizations) and delivered services such as economic development, health, education, housing and the environment.<sup>17</sup>

The number of Quangos doubled from forty in 1979 to eighty in 1991, when they employed 57,311 people and deployed a combined budget of £1.8 billion.<sup>18</sup> The Secretary of State appointed 1,400 board members to govern Quangos, enabling him to side-line Labour-dominated local government. The appointment process was informal and opaque, lacking advertisements, application forms, references or interviews. Appointees were drawn from a confidential list and tended to be middle-class businessmen with Conservative leanings and contacts.<sup>19</sup> Opposition parties questioned the processes leading to many appointments, such as the WDA Chairmanship secured by a businessman after a chance meeting with a Secretary of State at a Conservative Party fund-raising dinner, and a health authority member who was previously a Welsh Office minister's constituency secretary.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Council of Welsh Districts, *Quangos in Wales, a Discussion Document* (Cardiff, 1995), pp. 5-6. The Council of Welsh Districts represented the thirty-seven district councils.

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Morgan and Ellis Roberts, *The Democratic Deficit, A Guide to Quangoland*, Papers in Planning Research, 144 (Cardiff, 1993), p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> Russell Deacon, *The Governance of Wales – The Welsh Office and the Policy Process, 1964–99* (Cardiff, 2002), p. 168.

<sup>20</sup> *Western Mail* (henceforth WM), 7 July 1993. WM, October 22 1993.

Board members often held multiple positions across quangos and were portrayed accurately by the *Western Mail* as ‘the inner circle that runs Wales’ and the ‘Quango Kings’.<sup>21</sup> A publicly available list of board members did not exist. After much difficulty in obtaining data, the Labour-controlled Council of Welsh Districts calculated that the twelve Quangos with which it met regularly had 135 board members in total, but only sixteen of these were councillors.<sup>22</sup> By 1993 opposition parties saw Quangos as symbolizing the ‘democratic deficit’, and Redwood inherited a Welsh Office whose political legitimacy was increasingly questioned.

### JOHN REDWOOD: BACKGROUND AND BELIEFS

Redwood was born in 1951 and grew up in the affluent Kent town of Canterbury. His parents were from the upwardly-mobile lower middle class, enabling them to move from their council house in 1955 and send their son to be educated privately. He read history at Oxford University from 1968, became a fellow of All Souls College in 1972 and started doctoral research. However, he left after a year to work in the City as an investment analyst but still completed and published his doctorate in four years, helped by his logical if unpopular approach to his employment of leaving the office at 5.30 pm ‘on the dot ... because that’s what my contract said’.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Western Mail*, 20 August 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Council of Welsh Districts, *Quangos in Wales*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>23</sup> John Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660-1750* (London, 1976); Nigel Farndale, *Flirtation, Seduction, Betrayal: Interviews with Heroes and Villains* (London, 2002), p. 59.

Although Redwood's political career commenced in 1973 when he won a seat on Oxfordshire County Council, he stepped down in 1977 to concentrate on business. He was, nonetheless, involved in the rethinking of Conservatism prompted by the disintegration of the post-war consensus. His writings drew Thatcher's attention and in 1983 she recruited him to her Policy Unit, later appointing him as its head. He remained for two years and led the development of policies including those on privatization and the 1984-5 miners' strike. His views on the latter were uncompromising, advising Thatcher in July 1984 that the 'extreme left is mounting a major extra-parliamentary challenge to the government' as part of a 'revolutionary strategy' and that the miners should be defeated by a 'war of attrition'.<sup>24</sup> Redwood entered parliament in 1987 as MP for Wokingham, a prosperous constituency in the Thames Valley. He quickly progressed to become a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry in 1989 and Minister of State in 1992. He then moved to the Department of the Environment before joining the cabinet in 1993 as Secretary of State for Wales.

Redwood's political philosophy was strongly influenced by his family's social mobility. He recalled his university study of Marx as: 'the more I read, the more I loathed it ... it was difficult to reconcile the plumber joining the golf course with Marx's predictions [of class struggle]'.<sup>25</sup> He initially published commentary arguing for a smaller state and the encouragement of greater efficiency through privatization of nationalized industries, before developing a 'popular capitalism'. Redwood defined this as giving individuals a direct personal interest in a successful capitalist system by enabling 'everybody in the country' to

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<sup>24</sup> London, The National Archives (henceforth TNA), PREM19/1331 f61, Redwood minute to Margaret Thatcher, 13 July 1984.

<sup>25</sup> John Redwood, *Singing the Blues – The Once and Future Conservatives* (London, 2004), p. 11.

own a stake in property, industry or commerce.<sup>26</sup> His ideological vision was clear by the late 1980s: a deregulated and privatized economy in which individuals had a financial stake in broader economic success, complemented by a lean state that would enable individual choice when accessing public services.

Finally, Redwood's dry, intellectual and aloof personality emerged as a central element in his public persona. The tone was set in 1989 by *The Times* journalist Matthew Parris. After observing Redwood answering a parliamentary question about bananas, Parris lampooned the minister as 'a new creature, half human, half Vulcan, brother of the brilliant, cold-blooded Spock'.<sup>27</sup> Redwood's personality, his intelligence and a slight physical resemblance to the character in the TV series 'Star Trek' meant that the 'Vulcan' gibe stuck, and perceptions of oddity and otherworldliness accompanied him throughout his career.<sup>28</sup>

## SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES

Redwood's appointment to the Welsh Office in May 1993 was greeted with astonishment. Rhodri Morgan, Labour's frontbench spokesman on Welsh Affairs, claimed that the new Secretary of State would be as popular as a 'rugby league scout in a valleys rugby club', while Plaid Cymru leader Dafydd Wigley argued that Redwood would be as 'welcome as a

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<sup>26</sup> John Redwood, *Public Enterprise in Crisis: The Future of the Nationalised Industries* (Oxford, 1980); John Redwood, *Going for Broke: Gambling with Taxpayers' Money* (Oxford, 1984); Redwood, *Singing the Blues*, p. 70. John Redwood, *Popular Capitalism* (London, 1988).

<sup>27</sup> *The Times*, 2 November 1989.

<sup>28</sup> Other nicknames included the 'Man from Mars', 'JV' (an acronym of Just Visiting), and the 'Pol Pot of Privatization', e.g.: *Western Mail*, 26 May, 27 June 1995.

rat sandwich'.<sup>29</sup> The *Western Mail* noted the 'ominous implications' of appointing a Secretary of State whose 'only link with Wales is the M4'.<sup>30</sup> The London-based media was equally surprised, and a wry editorial in *The Times* portrayed Redwood as an absurd 'alien invader' and 'English proconsul', before observing that Wales had:

Suffered many strange invasions, from the Roman legions ... to Edward I's rabble army of conquest to this week's appointment of John Redwood. All would-be masters speak strange languages, Latin, English and in the case of Mr Redwood, an international jargon of econo-technology.<sup>31</sup>

Previous Conservative Secretaries of State navigated the more corporatist political culture of Wales by adopting a conciliatory approach, but Redwood's 'popular capitalism' meant that he was unsympathetic to collectivist traditions. He was dismissive of cultural differences to the point of incomprehension. He believed, for example, that the Welsh language acted only as a device to accentuate differences with non-Welsh speakers, writing shortly before his appointment that:

Special language betrays special thoughts ... if an Englishman enters a shop in Welsh-speaking parts of Wales the locals are likely switch promptly to speaking Welsh. Thus the Englishman cannot be sure whether they are talking about him.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 246, 7 July 1994, col. 467; *Independent*, 1 July 1995.

<sup>30</sup> *Western Mail*, 28 May 1993.

<sup>31</sup> *The Times*, 29 May 1993.

<sup>32</sup> John Redwood, *The Global Marketplace, Capitalism and its Future* (London, 1992), p. 223.

His intellectual self-confidence meant that he would not adapt his politics to suit distinct sensibilities in Wales, intending instead to use his office to attain two goals. One was to implement and promote his own political views. These views reflected his membership of the Thatcherite 'No Turning Back' group of Conservative MPs, named after Thatcher's defiant speech in 1980 when she declared 'You turn if you want to, the lady's not for turning'.<sup>33</sup>

Uniquely among Secretaries of State, Redwood set out his aims in a pamphlet, entitled 'Views from Wales'.<sup>34</sup> It extolled the role of the private sector and the individual, argued that Labour was increasingly accepting of a less statist approach and proposed that 'here in Wales we must carry that progress of education further'.<sup>35</sup> His advisor, Hywel Williams, observed that Redwood privately saw excessive state intervention as having turned Wales into a 'fantasy land of Keynes-by-Sea', and the Secretary of State wrote that 'government must concentrate its fire, [its] agencies must respond and the market must be given its head'.<sup>36</sup>

Redwood's other goal was to use Wales as a launch pad for broader political ambitions.

Hywel Williams observed acutely that Redwood saw Wales as 'fertile ground for a distinctive set of policies that would be an implicit commentary on the wider fortunes of Conservatism'.<sup>37</sup> Redwood wanted to raise his profile as a leader of the right in the Conservative Party to an extent that would enable him to challenge John Major for the leadership of the party and government. He planned to achieve both goals through promoting

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<sup>33</sup> Cambridge, Thatcher Archives, Speech at 1980 Conservative Conference, 10 October 1980.

<sup>34</sup> John Redwood, *Views from Wales* (London, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Redwood, *Views from Wales*, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Hywel Williams, *Guilty Men: Conservative Decline and Fall, 1991-1997* (London, 1998), p. 52; Redwood, *Views from Wales*, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *Guilty Men*, p. 51; Dylan Griffiths, *Thatcherism and Territorial Politics* (Aldershot, 1996), p. 56.

a radical and uncompromising agenda across two fronts, administrative efficiency and personal morality.

### ADMINISTRATIVE EFFICIENCY

Achieving greater administrative efficiency in the public sector by cutting expenditure and creating clearer lines of accountability was central to Redwood's political vision.

Unsurprisingly, he prioritized Quango reform and quickly instructed the Welsh Office to place newspaper advertisements inviting the public to apply for inclusion in the list of potential appointees to their boards.<sup>38</sup> Redwood publicly lectured Quango chairs on the need 'to maintain the highest standards of public probity',<sup>39</sup> but he remained dissatisfied. One source of discontent was that the individuals the Welsh Office trusted with board appointments were so few in number that identifying those without links to the Conservative Party was difficult. Problems were highlighted in 1993 when a newly-appointed WDA Chair, David Rowe-Beddoe, turned out to have led the Monte Carlo branch of Conservatives Abroad. The other cause of Redwood's discontent was a drip of scandal, with two quango leaders forced to resign early in 1994.<sup>40</sup>

Redwood responded with administrative reorganizations. The largest was the replacement of seventeen district health and family health bodies with five, while the number of fire service

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<sup>38</sup> *Western Mail*, 7 July 1993.

<sup>39</sup> *Western Mail*, 30 July 1993.

<sup>40</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 238, 3 March 1994, col. 1104; *Western Mail*, 3 February 1994; *Western Mail*, 13 May 1994.



authorities was to fall from eight to five.<sup>41</sup> He refused to extend the life of the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation,<sup>42</sup> before reviewing the Countryside Council for Wales and discovering that its 300 staff had the use of ninety vehicles. A furious Secretary of State saw this as wasteful, and decided to reduce the Council's staffing by a third and transfer nature reserve management to local authorities, charities and commercial organizations.<sup>43</sup>

The high-profile WDA was a particular target, as it was already entangled in controversy after a series of administrative and management lapses. The agency's foci were: land reclamation; property development; attracting foreign direct investment; and, investing in businesses. While the first was retained, others were downgraded as the WDA's Chief Economist, Brian Morgan, observed that Redwood saw it as 'interfering with the market mechanism and need[ing] to be reined in'.<sup>44</sup> The agency was ordered to sell its land and property, disposing of holdings worth £200 million including industrial estates owned publicly since the 1930s.<sup>45</sup> In foreign direct investment, Redwood opposed the WDA's successful use of financial incentives to attract investors and curtailed the agency's ability to

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<sup>41</sup> *Western Mail*, 5 November 1994, 31 May 1995.

<sup>42</sup> Established in 1987 to regenerate Cardiff's derelict docklands, its main project was a £200 million barrage. See Leon Goberman, 'The state and post-industrial urban regeneration: the reinvention of South Cardiff'. *Urban History Journal*, 45, 3 (2018), 504-23.

<sup>43</sup> *Western Mail*, 4 November 1994, 23 January 1995.

<sup>44</sup> Author's interview with Brian Morgan, Welsh Development Agency (henceforth WDA) Chief Economist (1991-7), 1 December 2011.

<sup>45</sup> TNA, WA 8/207, WDA Board Papers, 5 January 1994.

do so.<sup>46</sup> He ‘firmly opposed’ the agency’s venture capital activities,<sup>47</sup> and froze such activity for a year before allowing activity to continue at a much reduced level. Finally, Redwood’s meticulous attention to detail was apparent, telephoning the WDA’s Chair on the evening of 15 June 1994 to query individual staffing costs that had been incurred by overseas marketing activities.<sup>48</sup> All this meant that agency staff numbers fell as Redwood cut its public funding from £69.6 million in 1993-4 to £29.2 million in 1995-6.<sup>49</sup>

Aside from the Quangos, Redwood pruned administrative costs at the Welsh Office and planned to shed one-sixth of its staff.<sup>50</sup> In education, he funded the expansion of some oversubscribed schools before attacking standards elsewhere. He tactlessly informed an audience in the Rhondda that teachers and parents had failed to inspire a culture of success, later rejecting linkages between deprivation and low achievement as ‘patronising’.<sup>51</sup> Redwood then identified a proliferation of ‘men in grey suits’ in ‘far away offices’ in the NHS,<sup>52</sup> and ordered a three-year freeze on managerial numbers. Controversially, he claimed later that efficiency drives had enabled him to return £100 million of its block grant to HM Treasury, in complete contrast with his predecessors who focused on obtaining more resources. The claim was met with predictable outrage and was described later by Ron

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<sup>46</sup> Kevin Morgan, ‘The regional animateur: taking stock of the Welsh Development Agency’, *Regional and Federal Studies*, 7, 2 (1997), 70-94 (79).

<sup>47</sup> TNA, WA 8/219, WDA Board Papers, 28 February 1995.

<sup>48</sup> TNA, WA 8/223 WDA Board Papers, 28 June 1995.

<sup>49</sup> WDA Annual Reports 1993-94 to 1996-96.

<sup>50</sup> *Western Mail*, 15 December 1994.

<sup>51</sup> *Western Mail*, 22 February 1994; Redwood, *Views from Wales*, p. 16.

<sup>52</sup> Redwood, *Views from Wales*, p. 61.

Davies, Labour's Shadow Secretary of State, as 'raising the banner of Thatcherism ... it was a badge of honour for him, sending money back to London'.<sup>53</sup>

Redwood's zeal for reform extended to local government. His predecessor, David Hunt, had announced structural reforms that were embraced by the new Secretary of State as an opportunity for rationalization. In July 1993 Redwood announced that the number of councillors would fall by a third and that the two-tier system of eight county and thirty-seven district councils would be replaced with one tier of twenty-one authorities,<sup>54</sup> strengthened by functions transferred from Quangos. However, Redwood's actions were suddenly imperilled by the 'democratic deficit'. According to parliamentary standing orders, bills relating to Wales only were considered by a committee of all Welsh MPs, but the lack of Conservative MPs meant that any such committee would have blocked the bill creating new authorities. The government promptly suspended standing orders and drafted nine Conservative MPs from English constituencies onto the committee to ensure a majority. One was Michael Fabricant, MP for mid-Staffordshire. Challenged as to his sudden interest in Wales, he declared indignantly that his mother was Welsh, before visiting the National Eisteddfod only to become embroiled in heated and farcical arguments with members of the Welsh Language Society.<sup>55</sup> Other Conservative MPs, when asking questions in committee, were ridiculed due to their inability to pronounce county names correctly.

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<sup>53</sup> Author's interview with Ron Davies, Labour MP for Caerphilly (1983–2001), Shadow Secretary of State for Wales (1993–7), Secretary of State for Wales (1997–9), 7 March 2011.

<sup>54</sup> *Western Mail*, 14 July 1993.

<sup>55</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 229, 19 July 1994, col. 21; *Western Mail*, 5 August 1993.

Redwood's agency meant that Welsh Office policies were oriented firmly towards his ideology, and WDA director Ian Rooks recalled that 'almost for the first time ... we had a more explicit political agenda as opposed to an economic development agenda'.<sup>56</sup> Importantly, the Secretary of State was not a purely Thatcherite caricature, as demonstrated by his habit of pushing arguments to a strictly logical conclusion regardless of other, more practical, considerations. This habit meant that his main political target in Wales was, paradoxically if logically, his own party whose members he viewed correctly as being more interested in obtaining positions on Quangos than in winning arguments and promoting Conservatism. Conversely, his relationships with Labour-dominated local authorities were warmer than those with Conservative-dominated Quango boards; and Paul Griffiths, Assistant Secretary of the Council of Welsh Districts observed that 'of cabinet ministers, [Redwood] was almost unique in believing in local democracy'.<sup>57</sup>

Another surprising decision revealing his logical approach to policy related to Tower Colliery, the last remnant in Wales of the state-owned deep coal mining industry. British Coal announced the pit's closure and its managers discussed a buyout, but they were not supported by Redwood as he had long distrusted the management of nationalized industries. However, miners planning their own ultimately successful bid were amazed to receive the Secretary of State's enthusiastic support in spite of his implacable opposition to the miners' history of industrial activism. But the miners' decision to use their redundancy payments to buy the colliery meant that Redwood no longer saw them as the 'enemy within' of Thatcherite

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<sup>56</sup> Author's interview with Ian Rooks: WDA Executive Director, Marketing (1983–94), 1 November 2011.

<sup>57</sup> *Western Mail*, 5 July 1995.

legend;<sup>58</sup> instead, they were risk-taking commercial entrepreneurs who deserved support regardless of past allegiances.

Nevertheless, Redwood's focus on efficiency met with limited success. One reason was lack of time. His period in office was short and, for example, few appointments were made to Quango boards as a result of adverts. Equally importantly, his successor, William Hague, wanted to 'restore consensus' and cancelled Redwood's more controversial actions.<sup>59</sup> The other reason was administrative reluctance. A public example was the Countryside Council for Wales's campaign that portrayed Redwood's plans as the privatization of nature reserves, forcing him to delay the policy and retreat from it. While the extent of reluctance behind the scenes to carry out Redwood's demands cannot be quantified, Ron Davies noted that civil servants told him during his post-1997 period as Secretary of State that Redwood 'would say what he'd want, there was no discussion, and he would just leave them to get on with it [but] if you take that approach, the civil service sometimes will frustrate your wishes'.<sup>60</sup>

## MORALITY AND LEADERSHIP

As a Secretary of State with a broad range of responsibilities, Redwood could give speeches on most domestic topics. Although his speeches ostensibly addressed issues in Wales, they were in reality aimed at a broader audience to boost his profile and leadership ambitions. This pursuit of broader aims led him to ignore the requirement to clear speeches with cabinet

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<sup>58</sup> Used by Thatcher to describe the National Union of Mineworkers during the 1984-5 strike. Cambridge, Margaret Thatcher Archive. Speech to 1922 Committee, 19 July 1984.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with William Hague, cited in Deacon, *The Governance of Wales*, p. 39.

<sup>60</sup> Author's interview with Ron Davies.

colleagues or Downing Street before delivery, creating much annoyance.<sup>61</sup> Unusually, Redwood focussed on moral issues in his speeches as he argued that they could dominate political debate while he believed that linkages between economic liberalism and social problems were minimal.

In Wales, he made his first public statement of morality when he visited the deprived St Mellon's housing estate in Cardiff in July 1993. In a speech described by his advisor, Hywel Williams, as 'calculated to detonate a controlled explosion', Redwood condemned trends towards a greater number of single-parent families by arguing that 'if someone is old enough to father a child, he should be old enough to bring it up'.<sup>62</sup> Redwood then warned fathers that 'you can never divorce your children', before instructing parents to teach their children the difference between right and wrong, and to control their night movements.<sup>63</sup> He also called for greater politeness in society, urging parents, teachers and relatives to act against the 'yobbish tendency – we don't want young men shouting abuse and worse on the streets at night'.<sup>64</sup>

These interventions were made against the backdrop of John Major's 'back to basics' initiative, an ill-fated attempt to promote values such as 'respect for family and law'.<sup>65</sup> Conservatives to the right of the party, such as Redwood, promptly exploited the vagueness of 'back to basics' to create a moral crusade but their movement collapsed in farce amidst

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<sup>61</sup> John Major, *The Autobiography* (London, 2000), p. 621.

<sup>62</sup> Williams, *Guilty Men*, p. 47; *Western Mail*, 3 July 1993.

<sup>63</sup> *Western Mail*, 14 October 1993; *Western Mail*, 15 December 1993.

<sup>64</sup> Redwood, *Views from Wales*, p. 30.

<sup>65</sup> Major, *The Autobiography*, p. 554.

accusations about the personal behaviours of some Conservative politicians. No such revelations existed for Redwood, although Gwilym Jones, a Welsh Office Minister of State, was embarrassed after supporting the crusade against ‘jobs’ when he was revealed to have once been placed on probation for setting fire to a school.<sup>66</sup>

Redwood’s status as a cabinet troublemaker was symbolized by his opposition to the government’s European policies. He saw European integration as well as devolution to Wales and Scotland as existential threats to the UK’s constitutional integrity, later setting out such arguments in a book titled ‘The Death of Britain?’<sup>67</sup> Redwood’s arch-Euroscepticism led him consistently, if quixotically, to downplay the European Union’s importance in Wales. He ordered the WDA to replace the Welsh flag with the Union Jack at its Brussels office, stopped the Welsh Office seconding staff to the UK’s Representative Office, and attempted unsuccessfully to remove signage denoting infrastructure projects part-funded by the European Union.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, Euro-sceptic concerns had coalesced at Westminster as Conservative MPs rebelled against the 1992 Maastricht treaty that created the European Union in place of the European Economic Community. While Redwood’s ministerial position precluded his formal involvement in ongoing Eurosceptic discontent after the treaty was approved, he was widely assumed to be one of the ‘three bastards’ of the cabinet mentioned by Major in what the Prime Minister thought was a private conversation with a journalist in July 1993. ‘It’s a very

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<sup>66</sup> *Western Mail*, 21 September 1994.

<sup>67</sup> John Redwood, *The Death of Britain?* (Basingstoke, 1999).

<sup>68</sup> Jones, *Wales Since 1939*, p. 335; Author’s interview with Dafydd Wigley, Plaid Cymru MP for Caernarfon (1974–2001), President (1980–4, 1991–2000), 11 August 2012.

friendly cabinet’, was Redwood’s calm, if not wholly convincing, response.<sup>69</sup> Other disruptive interventions included him asking MPs to lobby the Chancellor against raising taxes and vociferous arguments with the Health Secretary over NHS bureaucracy. Finally, Redwood’s public determination to define an alternative agenda was mirrored in private. He wrote a ‘manifesto for Wales’ in March 1995 and submitted it to the Prime Minister’s office, but the document was in reality an ambitious shadow manifesto for the UK. He circulated other documents that roamed far beyond his remit throughout his time in government, including those proposing UK-wide cuts in public expenditure, the introduction of greater competition in the water industry and the privatization of the London Underground.<sup>70</sup>

#### A DISTINCTIVE PERSONALITY

The impact of Redwood’s frenetic activity was accentuated by his distinctive personality, which manifested itself in his dislike of entrenched public institutions and their bureaucracies. A WDA board member, Garel Rhys, argued that Secretaries of States had ‘gone native’<sup>71</sup> by building good relationships with institutions. Redwood was different and his advisor, Hywel Williams, argued that ‘the only institution he [Redwood] valued was his immediate family; it was a very modern kind of English loneliness’.<sup>72</sup>

Quango leaders were disturbed at the loss of their close relationships with the Welsh Office, and a WDA director, Gwyn Griffiths, recalled that Redwood ‘would take advice only from

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<sup>69</sup> *Western Mail*, 27 July 1993.

<sup>70</sup> Williams, *Guilty Men*, pp. 56, 73, 70.

<sup>71</sup> Author’s interview with Garel Rhys: WDA Board Member (1994–8), 5 November 2012.

<sup>72</sup> Williams, *Guilty Men*, p. 56.



elected members or the private sector. From public officers he only wanted facts.’<sup>73</sup>

Redwood’s ‘loneliness’ was reflected in frosty relations with the ‘Quango Kings’. Sir Geoffrey Inkin, chair of the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation and the Land Authority for Wales reflected that:

Curiously, there may have been an element of personal chemistry in this [relationship] there were no rows or anything like that, but it just wasn’t as comfortable for me and the interface between political direction and delivery as it was with the others [secretaries of state] who were of a different kind of style.<sup>74</sup>

The small scale of Wales created what Kevin Morgan, chair of the ‘Yes for Wales’ cross-party referendum campaign, described as a ‘village like atmosphere’ where offence was easily transmitted ‘through a series of interlocking ... networks’.<sup>75</sup> Nicholas Edwards, a previous Conservative Secretary of State, highlighted the importance of this ‘village’ environment by observing how Redwood’s confrontational approach angered many ‘able men and women’ in the ‘tight knit circle of Welsh political, cultural and media life’ and that efforts to ‘ease the tensions and improve relationships’ failed.<sup>76</sup> One ‘able’ person was Geraint Talfan Davies, the influential head of BBC Wales, who recalled how Redwood’s

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<sup>73</sup> Author’s interview with Gwyn Griffiths, WDA Executive Director (1990s), 10 November 2011.

<sup>74</sup> Author’s interview with Sir Geoffrey Inkin, Cardiff Bay Development Corporation Chair (1987–2000), 1 July 2012.

<sup>75</sup> Morgan, *Redesigning Democracy*, p. 57; see also Martin Johnes, ‘Cardiff: the making and development of the capital city of Wales’, *Journal of Contemporary British History*, 26, 4 (2012), 509–28 (523).

<sup>76</sup> Nicolas Edwards, *The Conservative Party and Wales* (Aberystwyth, 2006), p. 46.

‘powerful intellect, uncomfortable views and limited social skills’ combined to disquieting effect.<sup>77</sup>

Redwood was particularly damaged by his ‘Vulcan’ persona, which derived from his combination of an overly logical approach with an air of oddness. In common with his Conservative predecessors, he could not understand Welsh but unlike them he refused to add his signature to Welsh-language documents in spite of the availability of translations. The same impulses prompted a notorious reluctance to stay overnight in Wales. He instead preferred to return to his family home in Wokingham, remarking obliviously that he was ‘the only minister to be criticized for wanting to sleep with his own wife’.<sup>78</sup>

An air of oddness arose from what the *Western Mail* described as his ‘unerring ability to choose the wrong audience for his jokes’ as when he informed an audience of middle managers in Cardiff that he wanted to be as ‘popular as Mr Blobby’.<sup>79</sup> The most damaging episode, however, occurred at the 1994 Welsh Conservative Conference. Redwood was on stage as the dignitaries rose to sing the national anthem but, uncharacteristically, he had not prepared by learning the lyrics. He mimed awkwardly and his filmed performance became an infamous, oft-repeated and symbolic image that, according to Kevin Morgan, ‘summed up

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<sup>77</sup> Geraint Talfan Davies, *At Arm’s Length* (Bridgend, 2008), p. 151.

<sup>78</sup> *Independent*, 1 July 1995.

<sup>79</sup> *Western Mail*, 27 June 1995. ‘Mr Blobby’ was a character on ‘*Noel’s House Party*’, a peak-time BBC television programme. He was pink with yellow spots and acted as a mute jester, apart from his catchphrase of ‘blobby, blobby, blobby’.

disconnect' between Wales and Redwood, enabling constitutional arguments to 'percolate outside the bubble of devolution enthusiasts'.<sup>80</sup>

One cause of 'disconnect' was that unlike previous Secretaries of State, Redwood showed little interest in, or understanding of, Wales. This lack of interest prompted the Plaid Cymru leader, Dafydd Wigley, to argue that Redwood was 'a total liability' to the Conservatives, as 'he had his own agenda, he was interested in his own politics'.<sup>81</sup> Hywel Williams, Redwood's advisor, observed that the Secretary of State's most successful visits in Wales were to the 'anglicized and commercial South-East. Elsewhere he was ill at ease'. Williams captured Redwood's awkwardness in this 'elsewhere' by recounting a visit to the Merioneth set of *First Knight*, a film starring the Hollywood actor Richard Gere, where:

Redwood's conversation with a handful [of extras] convinced him that most came from Islington ... they were deemed to have shown a spirit of enterprise lacking in the indigenous Welsh ... We were received by Gere in his caravan ... Gere and I maintained a conversation about the merits of each other's ties, while a bored and miserable Redwood looked out of the caravan window at the rain descending on the hills. Perhaps, as the wind howled around the caravan and the conversation with Gere achieved new extremes of shallowness, he recalled his mordant remark that Patagonia was the only Welsh success story.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Interview between Martin Shipton, *Western Mail* Chief Reporter, and Kevin Morgan. Available online <https://www.acast.com/martinshiptonmeets/leaders-laggardsandwalescowedculturewithprofkevinmorgan?autoplay> [accessed on 25 February 2019].

<sup>81</sup> Author's interview with Dafydd Wigley, 11 August 2012.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, *Guilty Men*, p. 101.

His colleagues were acutely aware of the political risks of this lack of interest, symbolized by a television interview in October 1994 when he was quizzed for an hour but only mentioned Wales once.<sup>83</sup> Welsh Office Minister Wyn Roberts, described accurately by commentator Simon Brooks as a ‘sort of cultural translator for political tourists from England’, tried to cajole the Secretary of State to write speeches that showed he enjoyed being in Wales and liked the company of Welsh people, but Redwood could not be persuaded.<sup>84</sup>

The Secretary of State’s distinctive persona fed a reputation for extremism. Parliamentary whips tried to manage this tendency by encouraging Redwood’s parliamentary private secretary, David Evans MP, to ‘help him understand that we’re not all as bright as him’. Unfortunately for the whips, Evans’ influence was not one of moderation as highlighted by his proposals – publicized immediately by the *Western Mail* – that rapists should be castrated and violent criminals be ‘flogged and cat-o nine tailed’.<sup>85</sup> Despair set in within the Conservative Party in Wales about reputational damage but nothing could be done. Roberts later recalled how he decided to ‘watch over John and infuse some common sense into his decision making, given the chance. Alas, the chance occurred infrequently.’<sup>86</sup> Finally, Roberts retired as Minister of State in 1994 and was replaced by Rod Richards, MP for Clwyd North West. Richards enjoyed his new status as ‘Redwood’s Rottweiler’ and promptly stoked the reputation for outspoken extremism enveloping the Welsh Office by announcing

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<sup>83</sup> *Western Mail*, 11 October 1994.

<sup>84</sup> Simon Brooks, *Conservatism and the New Wales* (Llanrwst, 1999), p. 9; Williams, *Guilty Men*, p. 101.

<sup>85</sup> *Independent*, 10 July 1993; *Western Mail*, 9 June 1993.

<sup>86</sup> Roberts, *Right From the Start*, p. 275.

that residents of the south Wales valleys had ‘no expectations and no self-worth’ and that all Labour councillors were ‘short, fat, slimy and fundamentally corrupt’.<sup>87</sup>

The political consequences of all this were predictable with Ron Davies, Labour’s Shadow Secretary of State, noting that ‘we had great fun with Redwood, as history will recall in a number of ways’, given that he was:

Just archetypally an English Tory, who didn’t attempt to moderate his language ... he came to St. Mellon’s and talked about single-parent families. Well, he was right to choose the issue, but his language was wrong. It just came across as completely unsympathetic ... he was a Thatcherite.<sup>88</sup>

The obvious disconnection between Redwood and opinion in Wales meant that his attempts to use moral issues to detach socially-conservative voters from the Labour Party failed.

Support for the Conservative Party, already under pressure throughout the UK from the rise of Tony Blair’s New Labour and the parliamentary chaos surrounding Maastricht, promptly collapsed in Wales. Its vote share of 14.6 per cent in the 1994 European elections was a fall of 49 per cent from that achieved at the 1992 general election, compared to a drop of 36 per cent across the UK. By 1995 the Conservatives were reaching fringe-party status in Wales.

They plumbed new lows of 12 per cent in opinion polls and were humiliated at the Islwyn by-election of March 1995, when their vote share was a mere 3.9 per cent; their worst by-

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<sup>87</sup> BBC News, Welsh Tories choose ex-minister [online] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/211472.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/211472.stm) [accessed on 25 February 2019].

<sup>88</sup> Author’s interview with Ron Davies.

election performance in Wales since 1918.<sup>89</sup> The party's nadir came in the May 1995 local elections, when it won a derisory forty-two council seats out of 1,272.<sup>90</sup>

By the time Redwood's period in office ended with his resignation to challenge John Major for the leadership of the Conservative Party and the post of Prime Minister in mid-1995, estrangement at the Welsh office was complete and civil servants celebrated his departure.<sup>91</sup> Relief was profound as Wyn Roberts, always attuned to political and cultural intricacies, described Redwood as a 'very clever young man' who did 'not know the people he govern[ed]'.<sup>92</sup> The former Secretary of State's disastrous public image accompanied him and what the media described gleefully as his 'barmy army' or 'crazy gang' of supporters throughout his leadership campaign, the four-million selling *Sun* newspaper printed Vulcan ears for Redwood's supporters to cut out and wear, his campaign lost momentum and the bid failed.<sup>93</sup> He never held government office again and eventually became a prominent parliamentary supporter of Brexit, where his unyielding ideological approach was apparent again.

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<sup>89</sup> *Western Mail*, 1 March 1995; *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 225, 2 March 1995, col. 1222.

<sup>90</sup> *Western Mail*, 6 May 1995.

<sup>91</sup> *Independent*, 1 July 1995.

<sup>92</sup> Roberts, *Right From the Start*, p. 294. This observation was shared by Major, who wrote that Redwood did 'not take to the Welsh people, or they to him'. Major, *The Autobiography*, p. 621.

<sup>93</sup> BBC News, *Teresa Gorman, Thatcherite Maverick* [online] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/662353.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/662353.stm) [accessed on 25 February 2019]; Farndale, *Flirtation, Seduction, Betrayal*, p. 57.

## ‘A NEW BOGEYMAN’: IMPACT ON THE DEVOLUTION DEBATE

While Redwood might have been little more than a colorful footnote in the political history of Wales, his behavior had far-reaching consequences. The underlying causal factors that enabled devolution to come to fruition already existed, but four dynamics meant that Redwood magnified their political salience and enabled pro-devolutionists to build sufficient support to secure a narrow majority in favour of a devolved assembly in 1997.

First, Redwood reversed the post-1979 political position of the Welsh Office from a more accommodating ‘One Nation’ approach to one that was overtly Thatcherite. The fact that an individual lacking a Wales-based democratic mandate could carry out such a reversal exemplified constitutional inequity to his opponents. Crucially, Redwood’s personality and high profile meant that the constitutional settlement was not only discredited, but came to be seen as laughable. Reaction was particularly apparent in the Labour Party. Ron Davies, responsible for shepherding devolution through the party machinery, observed that the furore surrounding Redwood ‘helped’ devolution to be accepted,<sup>94</sup> with a detailed plan finally adopted in May 1995.

Crucially, Redwood’s behaviour had an impact on broader opinion, as noted by delighted activists and journalists. Kevin Morgan, Chair of ‘Yes for Wales’, recalled joking to colleagues during the campaign that ‘when Wales was a mature democracy, we’d raise a statue [of Redwood] in the Senedd as he’d done more to rally support than anyone else I could think of’, while Rhodri Morgan argued that ‘Redwood helped the case for devolution

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<sup>94</sup> Author’s interview with Ron Davies; Morgan and Mungham, ‘Unfinished business, Labour’s devolution policy’, p. 39.

simply by being John Redwood. He made himself into a new bogeyman on a par with Margaret Thatcher.<sup>95</sup> Finally, John Osmond, deputy editor of *Wales on Sunday*, argued that Redwood was ‘Thatcher personified in Wales ... he was magnificent from the point of view of the devolution argument, he only had to open his mouth and that was it’.<sup>96</sup>

Tellingly, pro-devolutionists portrayed their opponents as eccentric mouthpieces for Redwood and Thatcher, seen as ‘valuable bogeys’ by Leighton Andrews, the co-founder and deputy convenor of ‘Yes for Wales’. This identification presaged a campaign theme of creating an institution that could stop such politicians from controlling Welsh Office functions in future, summed up by the campaign slogan of ‘[it’s] time to take over the remote control’.<sup>97</sup> Significantly, Redwood’s reputation was sufficiently poor to long outlive his presence in Wales. For example, eleven years after Redwood’s departure, Nick Bourne, Conservative leader in the National Assembly, joked that he used a ‘Redwoodometer’ to measure how ‘rattled’ Labour politicians were by the frequency with which they mentioned the former Secretary of State’s name.<sup>98</sup>

Second, Redwood profoundly alienated the administrative and cultural elites, many of whom had been comfortable with previous Secretary of States’ approaches to governance that had enabled them to accrue influence and access to the Welsh Office. However, their discomfort with Redwood meant that they were more likely to favour a new constitutional settlement that

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<sup>95</sup> Shipton’s interview with Morgan; Rhodri Morgan, *Rhodri: A Political Life in Wales and Westminster* (Cardiff, 2017), p. 104.

<sup>96</sup> Author’s interview with John Osmond (deputy editor, *Wales on Sunday* in the 1990s), 25 July 2012.

<sup>97</sup> Andrews, *Wales says Yes*, pp. 128, 147.

<sup>98</sup> National Assembly for Wales, *Record of Proceedings*, 25 January 2006.



would prevent any repeat of his behaviour. An example was how former WDA Chief Executive David Waterstone helped marshal business support for devolution.<sup>99</sup> Although the Secretary of State's spouse, Gail, observed that 'sometimes we were even forgiven [in Wales] for not being Welsh',<sup>100</sup> the far warmer welcomes given to Secretaries of State such as Peter Walker and William Hague demonstrated that Redwood's nationality did not by itself provoke hostility, but that opposition derived instead from his inflexible and autocratic style of governance.

Third, Redwood's local government reforms removed powerful opponents of devolution by abolishing county councils. These bodies had long been distrustful of such change, fearing that they would be seen as a surplus tier of government if an Assembly was created. This fear drove seven of the eight county councils to oppose devolution in 1979, and two – South Glamorgan and Gwent – funded anti-devolution campaigns.<sup>101</sup> Many county councillors and officials retained a deep-rooted and influential scepticism of devolution thereafter, until they were silenced by Redwood's abolition of their authorities.

Finally, Redwood's behaviour almost terminally damaged the Conservatives in Wales. Damage was symbolized by crushingly poor electoral performances that could not be repaired by his more emollient successor, William Hague. The results of the 1997 general

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<sup>99</sup> Author's interview with Leighton Andrews, co-founder and deputy convenor of the 'Yes for Wales' campaign, 11 March 2019.

<sup>100</sup> *Western Mail*, 27 June 1995.

<sup>101</sup> J. Barry Jones and R.A. Wilford, "Implications: Two Salient Issues," in *The Welsh Veto: The Wales Act and the 1979 Referendum*, eds. David Foulkes, J Barry Jones and R.A. Wilson (Cardiff, 1983): 216-230 (219-20).

election were so poor that the Conservatives lost a greater proportion of their 1992 vote share in Wales than across the UK, while the loss in Wales of 9 percentage points from 1992 to 1997 was over double the 3.6 percentage points lost between 1979 and 1992.<sup>102</sup> Nonetheless, Redwood's attempt to use morality to appeal to socially-conservative Labour voters was not entirely misplaced. Polling in 1997 suggested that 74 per cent of the electorate in Wales supported film and magazine censorship to 'uphold moral values', while 75 per cent thought that 'young people today don't have enough respect for traditional values'. However, the problem faced by the Conservatives during and after Redwood's period in office was that most of the electorate saw them as unwilling to defend Welsh interests. A mere 12.2 per cent thought that the party would defend Welsh interests 'always' or 'most of the time', compared to 50.9 per cent who thought the same of the Labour Party.<sup>103</sup>

The electoral collapse of the Conservatives had two consequences for the anti-devolution 'Just say No' campaign. One was organizational. The party was the only mainstream political force opposed to devolution and its eclipse meant that 'Just say No' lacked bases on which to build organizational strength. In contrast, 'Yes for Wales' drew broad-based support from local, civil society and party political groups, including the Labour Party which had secured a landslide general election victory a few months previously.<sup>104</sup> However, the momentum of this victory and the undoubted popularity of Blair did not translate automatically into support for devolution. John Curtice, later President of the British Polling Council, argued

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<sup>102</sup> Awan-Scully, 'The history of one-party dominance in Wales'.

<sup>103</sup> 'Appendix II: The questionnaires', in Taylor and Thompson (eds), *Scotland and Wales: Nations Again?*, pp. 248, 265.

<sup>104</sup> Andrews, *Wales says Yes*, p. 116.

convincingly in 1999 that the results demonstrated that referendums were ‘not just a reflection of the popularity of the incumbent government’.<sup>105</sup>

The other consequence was financial. While ‘Yes for Wales’ was described by its deputy convenor Leighton Andrews as ‘very under resourced’,<sup>106</sup> ‘Just say No’ faced greater difficulties. A stronger Conservative Party could have provided, or arranged for, financial support but its Research Officer for Wales, David Melding, argued that electoral collapse was ‘a paralysing anaesthetic’ to a party ‘bereft of means and mission’.<sup>107</sup> The Conservatives were preoccupied with clearing debts from their failed general election campaign and lacked funds to support ‘Just say No’. Crucially, post-referendum polling found that supporters of devolution were more likely to have voted than opponents,<sup>108</sup> pointing to the difficulties faced by the poorly resourced and marginalized anti-devolution campaign when mobilizing support.

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<sup>105</sup> John Curtice, ‘Is Scotland a Nation and Wales not?’, in Taylor and Thompson (eds), *Scotland and Wales: Nations Again?*, p. 143; For example, Blair visited Wrexham during the campaign and received a welcome described by *The Guardian* as ‘a new phenomenon in British politics, the Prime Minister as rock star [...] the crowd began to look like an excited mob’, but a majority of voters in Wrexham and the surrounding area rejected devolution; *The Guardian*, 17 September 1997.

<sup>106</sup> Author’s interview with Andrews.

<sup>107</sup> J. Barry Jones, ‘The no campaign: division and diversity,’ in J. Barry Jones and Dennis Balsom (eds), *The Road to the National Assembly for Wales*, pp. 70-95 (72).

<sup>108</sup> Evans and Trystan, ‘Why was 1997 different?’, in Taylor and Thompson (eds), *Scotland and Wales: Nations Again?*, p. 107.

## CONCLUSION

This article argues that although Redwood was not solely responsible for persuading a slim majority to vote in favour of devolution, his inadvertent magnification of pre-existing causal factors was crucial in driving greater acceptance of constitutional change. The importance of his impact was clear from the extent to which the electoral performance of the Conservatives in the mid-1990s was even worse in Wales than the rest of the UK. His impact was also demonstrated by the recollections of pro-devolution figures who could scarcely believe that the Secretary of State would behave in a manner that inadvertently justified their arguments for devolved government. Redwood's awkward presence was a reminder that the electoral majority in Wales had no formal influence at the Welsh Office. His relentless focus on efficiency and individualism were deliberately reminiscent of Thatcher, while his attempts to reform the Quangos highlighted their unrepresentativeness. All this was greatly accentuated by Redwood's disinterest in, and disdain for, Wales; the impact of such perceptions on popular and elite opinion was dramatic and echoed years after his departure.

Overall, Redwood inadvertently discredited the Welsh Office and the Conservative Party in Wales. The loss of credibility was such that the existing constitutional settlement was seen as unacceptable and even laughable, enraging and energizing supporters of devolution before demoralizing and discrediting its opponents. Elevated levels of discontent were then exploited by pro-devolutionists to build sufficient momentum to secure a narrow victory against a weakened opposing campaign. Redwood had grand plans for Wales, where he was to impose an inflexible and morally-charged Thatcherite agenda before becoming Prime Minister. Instead, his ideological actions hindered his political career, harmed his party and helped facilitate devolution, outcomes that were the exact opposite of his intentions.