

# The language of priorities: Aneurin Bevan, Welsh labour and the politics of the past

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## Abstract

The past is integral to Labour Party politics, serving as a constant reference point in articulating a politics for the present and in responding to defeats. In Wales, however, 100 years of electoral dominance means that Welsh Labour has not had to respond to defeat in the same way. This article therefore analyses how Welsh Labour utilises the past when constructing its brand, articulating its ideology and challenging opponents. To do this, it analyses Welsh Labour politicians' references to Aneurin Bevan, a significant figure in Labour history. The analysis argues that while Welsh Labour's engagement with the past has helped it to maintain electoral dominance, the references do not engage critically with the party's traditions, risk ideological inertia and signal potential dangers for the dominant party in a one-party dominant system.

## Keywords

devolution, dominant party system, labour party, nostalgia, Wales

## Introduction

Nostalgia is commonplace in left-wing politics. Even among radicals looking towards the future, a sense of loss is fundamental to the radical imagination (Bonnett, 2010). This is certainly the case in the United Kingdom, particularly in the Labour Party (Jobson, 2018; Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2010: 527–529). As Emily Robinson identifies, '[t]elling stories about the past has been particularly important to Labour politics' (Robinson, 2017: 39). Robinson was here drawing on the work of Henry Drucker who emphasised the doctrine and ethos of the Labour Party. For Drucker, the ethos of the party is a set of values that emerge out of a particular experience: in Labour's case, it has reflected the experience of the working class in Britain, which has been an experience of exploitation (Drucker, 1979: 9–11). Drawing on this history and ethos has been integral to Labour politics.

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This article seeks to demonstrate how Labour Party politicians make rhetorical appeals to the past as a way of constructing their brand. Yet, the focus is not on the party at the UK level, but on Welsh Labour. Labour's position is unique in Wales, having enjoyed a period of one-party dominance almost unprecedented in the democratic world (Larner, 2018; McAllister, 1981; Wyn Jones, 2019; Wyn Jones and Larner, 2020). This resilience is demonstrated by its winning of every general election in Wales since 1922, while it has remained the largest party at every devolved election and formed every Welsh government. Unlike Labour at Westminster or Holyrood, Labour has been resilient in Cardiff Bay. Yet, as this analysis demonstrates, while rhetorical appeals to the past have helped Welsh Labour maintain its dominance, a reliance on the past is a potential risk for the dominant party in a one-party dominant system.

To undertake this analysis, the article explores how Welsh Labour has invoked the memory of a significant politician in the party's history to articulate an image of radical politics – Aneurin Bevan. Hailed as the 'founder of the NHS', Bevan enjoys a substantial legacy. Statues and monuments have been erected in his honour, while hospitals and even pubs have been named after him. Every year, in commemoration of the founding of the NHS, Bevan's hometown Tredegar celebrates the 'Nye Bevan Festival' to honour one of the town's favourite heroes. Some of Bevan's most famous quotes are deployed on banners, Twitter profiles and placards celebrating Bevan and the NHS.

This article has three aims: first, to identify the role the past plays in Welsh Labour's rhetoric through analysing invocations of Bevan; second, to identify the reasons for invoking Bevan; and finally, to assess the implications of the dominant party in a one-party dominant system utilising the past to articulate its ideas. To achieve these aims, speeches, interviews and comments of Welsh Labour leaders will be analysed, with specific focus on their references to Bevan. In contributing to the literature on how parties engage with the past, this article argues that when there is little depth to rhetorical appeals, the result is a lack of intellectual rigour and, ultimately, ideological inertia.

### *Welsh labour and one-party dominance*

This article represents a unique study into Welsh Labour's rhetorical appeals. While David Moon has carried out research into the rhetoric of Welsh Labour leaders, identifying their adoption of Welsh political traditions to articulate the party's ideology (Moon, 2013, 2017; Moon and Bratberg, 2010), there is a paucity of studies into Welsh Labour's engagement with its past. This is surprising given the close association between Wales and the Labour Party (Leeworthy, 2018; Smith, 1993; Tanner et al., 2001; Williams, 1985; Wright, 2016), and a significant oversight considering Labour's unique electoral success in Wales. In fact, Wales is often overlooked in publications exploring Labour's recent history (see Leys and Panitch, 2020 and Diamond, 2021).

Labour's long electoral dominance in Wales has brought it many benefits. For instance, as T. J. Pempel (1990: 334) argues, the resources afforded to a dominant party allow it 'to remake the country in its own image and likeness', benefitting its supporters, while also weakening opponents who are forced to adapt and struggle on the dominant party's turf. The unique context of Welsh politics can therefore provide new perspectives into how political actors utilise the past in different rhetorical contexts. It will be shown that while Labour figures have used the past to respond to electoral defeats, Welsh Labour since devolution has not needed to undertake the same process.

## Aneurin Bevan

The memorial stones just north of Bevan's hometown Tredegar and his statue in Cardiff stand as memorials to a figure revered in Wales and across the United Kingdom. A fascinating and often contentious character, claims to Bevan's legacy occur across the political spectrum. He has a special place in the hearts of Welsh Labour activists and politicians (Goodman, 1997) and is often revered as someone Labour politicians should aspire to replicate. Recent examples of this reverence include: MPs re-forming the Tribune Group in 2017 (Helm, 2017), insisting that they were following the principles of Bevan and his colleagues at the newspaper (Griffin et al., 2020). Owen Smith invoking Bevan on numerous occasions during his unsuccessful leadership bid in 2016 (Davies, 2016b; Myers, 2016); and Jeremy Corbyn being photographed speaking in front of the Aneurin Bevan stones in Tredegar (Wales Online, 2018). We shall see in this article how politicians pick and choose from a range of identities when engaging with the past. This is clear in the invocation of Bevan; while Wales and Welsh constituencies have produced several prominent Labour figures (James Griffiths, Michael Foot, James Callaghan, Neil Kinnock), none have remained so ingrained in popular memory, or invoked as much reverence in Labour rhetoric, than Bevan.

In Wales, this legacy has arguably been played on even more significantly. Bevan is often championed as a 'Welsh' hero, even being voted as the greatest ever Welsh person in an online poll (BBC, 2004a). Welsh Labour politicians regularly point to their achievements as having been inspired by Bevan, carrying out the twin functions of both praising Bevan as a *Welsh* hero and praising him as a *Labour* hero. While focusing on Welsh Labour may overlook invocations of Bevan across the labour movement and in British politics more broadly, this article seeks to explore these invocations in the context of Wales' unique electoral and political circumstances.

Such articulations have proven politically advantageous. As Moon (2013, 2016, 2017) observes, since devolution Welsh Labour politicians have invoked (or manufactured) a radical political tradition as a way of legitimising their party's policies. For instance, when Tony Blair was pursuing market-orientated health policies in England, Wales' First Minister Rhodri Morgan put 'clear red water' between the policies of the two nations (Morgan, 2002). Morgan also associated his government's policies with a radical *Welsh* political tradition (Moon, 2013: 316), marking Welsh Labour as ideologically distinct from UK Labour, following a policy strategy rooted in nationally bounded politics that could be described as socialist, 'Classic Labour' or 'Real Labour', linking socialism with Welshness.

Such references confirm Pempel's observation that dominant parties remake the image of a country, weakening opponents; as James Martin argues, ideas are like projectiles, 'purposefully displacing the context around them' (Martin, 2015: 26). This is evident in the ways other parties, in response to Welsh Labour, have also invoked Bevan (Davies, 2016a) to communicate either their radical credentials – such as former Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood (The Scotsman, 2014) – or, in the case of Welsh Conservative leader Andrew RT Davies, their Welshness (Davies, 2021). Welsh Labour, in its claims to be the protector of tightly defined Welsh values, has certainly set the terms of debate, forcing other parties to articulate their own Welsh credentials and links to the past, thus remaking the country and political discourse in its own image.

## Structure

The article begins by exploring the literature on the left's engagement with the past, in the Labour Party and in British politics. It draws heavily upon Emily Robinson's (2012) concept of 'presentist' politics as a means through which to study Welsh Labour's rhetoric. Following this, the article explains the methods by which references to Bevan will be analysed, as well as the benefits of studying speeches and rhetoric. It then outlines the ways in which Bevan is invoked. These are as follows: first, Bevan's role as the 'founder of the NHS' is used to legitimise Welsh Government health policies and link the party to an inherited Welsh radical tradition. And second, while Bevan has been identified as a radical politician, his memory has also been invoked to indicate the importance of 'pragmatism'.

Finally, the article goes on to analyse the unique context of engaging with the past in a one-party dominant system. It argues that while there are benefits to Welsh Labour's appeals, there are dangers unique to a party in such a dominant long-term electoral position. Not only does this discussion contribute to our understanding of multi-level politics in the United Kingdom, but it also explores the unique political and ideological contexts of one-party dominant systems.

## Rhetoric and the past

Nostalgia is an essential feature of ideological practice (Kenny, 2017: 270). Despite the left's tendency to articulate visions of the future, the past is ever-present in the minds of progressives. Alastair Bonnett (2010: 29), in his study of radicalism and the politics of nostalgia, notes that ideas such as solidarity and authenticity have become 'idealized and identified with the past'. Therefore, visions of new societies based on progressive principles are linked to historical struggles (Kenny, 2017: 261). While nostalgia has previously been treated with suspicion and associated with reaction and resistance to progress (Bonnett, 2010: 2–3), the past has been used by progressive movements as a link to present politics, giving people a sense of connection and ownership to it (Bonnett, 2010: 40).

Studies into Labour's relationship with the past have focused on its use in articulating a politics for the present. These studies have primarily concentrated on the way New Labour engaged with its past (Cronin, 2004; Randall, 2009; Robinson, 2012) and debates within the party after its 2010 electoral defeat. The latter set of literature has consisted of a variety of studies, including analysis of the role of nostalgia (Jobson, 2018; Jobson and Wickham-Jones, 2010), debates between advocates of 'blue Labour' and 'one nation Labour' (Lawrence, 2013), locating policy narratives within Labour's traditions (Atkins, 2015), and studying how Labour leaders tell stories about the past to define their leadership and their audience (Robinson, 2017).

When exploring these themes, Emily Robinson's (2012: 2) work is particularly useful. Robinson argues that history is ever-present in political discourse, 'providing a source of lessons, warnings and precedents'. Similarly, Jon Lawrence (2000: 341–342) states that party activists strongly believe in continuity, 'seeking to place themselves within an unfolding, seamless history of political commitment'. A link with the past is therefore 'a valuable political commodity' (Robinson, 2012: 4) and history a 'powerful source of legitimation' (Robinson, 2012: 14). Robinson (2012: 184) describes this association with the past as 'presentism', where the past is 'both knowable and comparable to the present', a source of lessons, and something that 'can be invoked and then forgotten'. The present

is therefore set ‘within the frameworks of the past, making it always “the same old thing”’ (Robinson, 2012: 183). The result is politicians ‘picking and choosing from a range of possible inspirations and political identities’ (Robinson, 2012: 6). Furthermore, claims to a particular history are ‘attempts to be set within an orderly line of similarly historic actions reaching from the known past into the projected future’ (Robinson, 2012: 183). The result is that ‘the political present is also imagined as part of a rather more whiggish linear historical narrative’ (Robinson, 2012: 6). The past therefore serves and legitimises the present. These traits are fundamental to the rhetoric of progressive politicians in Britain. The left, Robinson (2012: 22) argues, uses the past ‘to recover and remember past struggles and oppressions and to carry forward the outrage necessary to reshape the present and future’.

There are several ways in which the past can be explored – the role of nostalgia (Jobson, 2018; Kenny, 2017), myths (Lawrence, 2000) and historical memory (Müller, 2002) – which will be discussed throughout the present article. They all share one important feature: the value of the past to present (Welsh Labour) politics. Robinson’s work therefore provides a framework to explore how Welsh Labour leaders reach into the past to articulate a politics for the present. As the article demonstrates, it helps us to see how Welsh Labour leaders set the present ‘within the frameworks of the past’, ‘pick and choose’ from possible identities and set the party within ‘a line of similarly historic actions’. As will be demonstrated, this engagement with the past is prevalent, and potentially dangerous, within dominant parties in one-party dominant systems.

Alan Finlayson and James Martin note the value of speeches in understanding politicians’ beliefs and ideologies. They argue that through speeches ‘we gain access not merely to the thoughts of an individual but to the more general ideological assemblages at work across a party or governmental organisation’ (Finlayson and Martin, 2008: 449). Examining rhetorical speech can therefore ‘illuminate one of the vital means by which actors do politics with ideas’ (Martin, 2015: 40). Political speech is a way ‘of projecting an idea of where we are heading next’, which involves ‘telling stories about particular political traditions – identifying forebears, lost prophets, dangerous diversions, and true believers’ (Robinson, 2017: 39). The past looms large in the speeches and pronouncements of Welsh Labour politicians. By studying these, we can understand how history and tradition informs the present-day politics of Welsh Labour.

Approximately, 30 speeches, essays, articles and interviews containing references to Bevan by Welsh Labour First Ministers – Rhodri Morgan, Carwyn Jones and Mark Drakeford – have been collected and analysed. The documents vary in form and audience; therefore, effort has been made throughout the present article to provide relevant context where necessary. The time frame and political situation of these reflections are also important. During Morgan’s tenure as leader, Labour held power at Westminster, while Jones faced an austerity-pursuing Conservative government, as well as a new Labour leader in Jeremy Corbyn. Drakeford’s pronouncements often came when he was Minister of Health in Jones’ government; therefore, he also faced a Conservative government that was launching attacks on the Welsh NHS (BBC, 2014).

A word of caution is necessary: it is not the intention of this article to create, as Bonnett (2010: 42) describes, a ‘hierarchy of nostalgic forms’, or to ‘differentiate good forms of nostalgia from bad forms of nostalgia’. While there has been what Michael Kenny depicts as a ‘normative reflex’ to nostalgia, where it has been decontested as a negative (Kenny, 2017: 258), this article does not study Welsh Labour’s engagement with the past in a normative way. Dismissing nostalgia risks overlooking its complex and often powerful

character (Welsh Labour, 2017: 270). Instead, it simply acknowledges the centrality of an engagement with the past, while studying how this engagement plays out in the context of a one-party dominant system, and its potential consequences.

The work of aforementioned authors is helpful to a study of Welsh Labour's references to Bevan and the past, and will be drawn upon to outline the benefits and dangers of these. While invoking Bevan's legacy helps Welsh Labour politicians legitimise their party's policies and locate it within a radical, Welsh political tradition, capturing votes from across the political spectrum in Wales, doing so also risks Welsh Labour becoming stuck in the past and failing to revitalise its ideology.

## **Welsh Labour and Bevan**

### *Bevan, the NHS and Welsh socialism*

Unsurprisingly, the most common reference to Bevan concerns the NHS, arguably the United Kingdom's most cherished institution (Brown, 2018). While the foundation of the NHS is more complex than simply being a Bevan creation (demonstrative of the picking and choosing of history prevalent in presentism), it is nevertheless remembered as his achievement. In 2008, for example, when celebrating the 60th anniversary of the NHS, Rhodri Morgan claimed that its creation 'is arguably the greatest achievement of any government of the 20th century', declaring that we 'all owe Nye Bevan a huge debt of gratitude for having the remarkable foresight and courage to introduce the NHS in 1948'. Morgan also plotted a line from Bevan to the Welsh Government: 'We are investing heavily in a range of new initiatives to ensure that Nye Bevan's vision of a health service for all is fit and able to meet the health challenges of the 21st century' (NHS Wales, 2008).

This representation of the past as part of a historical narrative is also present in the statements of Morgan's successor Carwyn Jones who proclaimed that Welsh Labour 'still hold true to the founding principles of our NHS – delivering healthcare from cradle to grave – free at the point of delivery, holding true to Nye Bevan's vision even after six decades' (Jones, 2012). Here, Jones was emphasising the core NHS, and apparently Bevan, principle of being free at the point of delivery. In 2013, Jones stated that in Wales,

when it comes to the NHS, there's no market, no privatisation, no unworkable reform agenda . . . Our NHS – the Welsh NHS – remains true to Bevan's founding principles and remains true to [the] ethos that has served it well since inception.

Jones also pointed to free prescriptions, increased access to GPs and the establishment of an opt-out for organ donation in Wales (Jones, 2013). Before departing as leader, he proudly reflected on ending 'the internal market in the Welsh NHS – ensuring a health service that is fit for purpose and true to Bevan's ideals' (Jones, 2018).

Current leader Mark Drakeford has spoken in the same tone as his predecessors. While Minister for Health, Drakeford declared that the Welsh NHS was a 'modern miracle', 'shunning the marketplace and competition', while remaining 'true to the values of Nye Bevan' (NHS Wales, 2013). More recently, while campaigning to become leader, he stated that the Welsh NHS 'continues to operate on the essential Bevan principle that it is the acuteness of your need, not the depths of your pocket, that determines who gets priority' (Drakeford, 2018a). A link to Bevan is therefore a source of legitimation for Welsh Labour leaders, allowing them to present the party as continuing a proud tradition that can



be traced back to 1948. References to the NHS demonstrate that ‘political discourse trades in the ‘historic’: monumental battles, epoch-changing decisions, great personalities’ (Robinson, 2012: 32).

The NHS also invokes ‘born in Wales’ radical politics, an integral aspect to Welsh Labour’s rhetoric (Moon, 2013). Morgan reflected on Wales’ importance as the place where ‘Bevan was born and grew up with the values that caused him to develop the whole concept of the NHS’. It made Morgan ‘feel immensely proud to be Welsh’ (Daily Post, 2007). Years later, Jones declared with pride that the NHS ‘was made in Wales and is safe in Wales under Labour’ (Jones, 2012), claiming it to be a ‘Tredegar invention, a Welsh invention, rolled out across the UK’ (BBC, 2018b). In 2006, while Professor of Social Policy at the University of Cardiff, and Cabinet health and social policy adviser to the Welsh Government, Drakeford wrote that the NHS was ‘an iconic achievement of the British Labour movement’ whose ownership, therefore, ‘has always been a matter of fierce national pride’ in Wales. He continued that ‘No speech by any Welsh Labour politician, up to and including the present day, can avoid at least a ritual nod in the direction of the “created here in Wales” origins of the health service’ (Drakeford, 2006: 546). As illustrated, this has certainly been the case, with Drakeford reinforcing the notion that Welsh Labour is *the* natural protector of Bevan’s legacy.

As a result of the NHS legacy, Bevan has been linked to a radical political tradition. Subsequently, emphasis is also often placed on Bevan being a *Welsh* radical politician. The ‘made in Wales’ label connects him to a Welsh radical political tradition that Welsh Labour politicians seek to invoke as part of its soft-nationalist positioning. Identifying a Welsh radical tradition is complex. The term ‘radicalism’ has been applied to socialist (namely, labourist), liberal and nationalist politics in Wales, with these different elements often interacting. Traditions are contingent on political actors and the stories they construct about the past (Bevir and Rhodes, 2001: 10). Therefore, when it comes to Welsh radical traditions, it is the tradition invoked and interpreted by Welsh Labour leaders that is important to explore. ‘Clear red water’, arguably the defining characterisation of Welsh Labour’s policy and strategy under Morgan, rooted the Welsh Government’s agenda in a tradition built from the ‘proud, sometimes agonising history of a nation built very largely on the efforts of working people in hard surroundings’ that was the ‘social heritage out of which Welsh devolution has been created’. In describing himself as a ‘socialist of the Welsh stripe’, Morgan focused on citizenship rights, the ‘fundamentally socialist’ aim of equality of outcome, and the establishment of free ‘universal services’ (Morgan, 2002). While announcing in 2003 that the Welsh Government would introduce free prescriptions to everyone in Wales, Morgan declared that this was ‘Nye Bevan’s great dream and we are determined to make it a reality for every man, woman and child in Wales’ (Weaver, 2003), invoking Bevan’s struggle against prescription charges for teeth and spectacles, which led to his resignation from cabinet. Here, Morgan was demonstrating the tendency of progressive politics to revive past struggles, rooting his government in the ‘traditions of Titmus, Tawney, Beveridge and Bevan’. Bevan has been firmly placed within a socialist and distinctly Welsh tradition by all three leaders.

Similarly, Bevan has also been utilised to distance the Welsh Government from both Labour and Conservative UK Governments. As Moon notes, the rhetoric behind ‘clear red water’ emphasised a *Welsh* approach to policy-making (Moon, 2013). Not only does this connect Welsh Labour to its past, but it also involves a pragmatic attempt to develop ‘made in Wales’ and *made for* Wales policies developed ‘in nationally bounded terms’ and ‘linked to a particular nation-derived necessity’ (Moon, 2013: 308). Morgan did not want

to encourage the English NHS model: greater consumer choice does not fit with ‘Welsh values’, which Bevan was presumed to have embodied (Moon, 2013: 311). While pragmatic, this Welsh agenda has also been based on what Morgan described as ‘classic Labour’ (BBC, 2015a). Socialism and Welshness are thus linked in Welsh Labour rhetoric (Davies and Williams, 2009: 187–188; Moon, 2013: 316).

Drakeford has also invoked Bevan and radical socialist politics. When campaigning to become leader, he referenced Bevan’s ‘language of priorities’ – ‘The language of priorities is the religion of socialism’ (Labour Party, 1949). He described his priorities as Finance Minister as ‘the struggle to ensure our ever-shrinking resources match Labour’s key priorities for our economy, our environment and our public services’. He then emphasised the socialist principles:

If I become Labour Leader then my determination will be to revive and reapply in today’s circumstances a set of fundamental and enduring democratic socialist principles forged here in Wales and which have shaped the whole of my political life (Drakeford, 2018b).

In his victory speech, Drakeford claimed that his election as leader represented a choice for ‘a Labour Party true to our roots as a party in the radical socialist tradition of Aneurin Bevan and Michael Foot and of Rhodri Morgan’ (Shipton, 2018). Further utilising Bevan in opposition to the UK Government, Drakeford used his 2021 Aneurin Bevan Memorial Lecture to proclaim the importance of the United Kingdom as a union of nations and to accuse Boris Johnson’s government of jeopardising its future (Drakeford, 2021).

### *Pragmatic Bevan*

Part of the legend surrounding Bevan is the political process of establishing the NHS. As the minister responsible, Bevan negotiated with the hostile British Medical Association, while also facing opposition from the Conservatives and even members of his own party (Foot, 1975b: Chapters 3 and 4; Thomas-Symonds, 2015: Chapter 10). Bevan is therefore considered not only as a radical politician but also as an institution builder, applying ‘general principles to the dilemmas of the time’ (Foot, 1975a: 303), while understanding the multi-faceted nature of power and the need for compromise (Nuttall, 2008: 25). While left-wing critics of the Labour Party saw this as a weakness on Bevan’s part (Miliband, 2009; Nairn, 1964), historians have emphasised the moderate and pragmatic nature of the party and its politicians, particularly in Wales (Williams, 2001). Therefore, this trait has not been considered alien to a Welsh radical tradition. Instead, authors have noted the ‘radical pragmatism’ of Labour politics in Wales (Leeworthy, 2018). It is a trait considered by many to be fundamental to Bevan alongside his radicalism.

Bevan’s pragmatism has been a central feature of Welsh Labour leaders’ pronouncements. In 2010, for example, Morgan gave a speech where he pondered over Bevan’s significance to contemporary politics. While referencing the Labour leadership contest that was taking place that year, Morgan argued that Bevan’s legacy could never be more relevant. He insisted that the leadership candidates could ‘learn a great deal from how you do walk that tightrope between dogmatism on the left and careerism on the right’. Morgan wanted a leader who could ‘implement what’s in the manifesto if you actually get the chance and overcome the kind of stakeholders who might be resistant to Labour ideas’ (Morgan, 2010: 12–13). He insisted that Bevan possessed ‘supreme administrative skills when given his one great opportunity in practical politics as a cabinet minister’ (Morgan, 2010: 11).



Echoing this, Morgan pointed to his government's pragmatic and non-ideological approach to health policy (BBC, 2004b). This pragmatism was also referenced by Jones who, while Minister for the Environment in Morgan's government, insisted that Labour's 'abiding tendency has been pragmatic' (Jones, 2004: 5). He argued that it 'is at its best when it looks for practical solutions to the problems of working people and their families' and focuses on 'delivering change based on principle, and delivery has always been the priority'. 'Welsh socialism', he argued, must be the same, with an emphasis placed on 'delivery rather than political purity'. Welsh voters were 'not interested in those who retreat into dogma or quote political theory' (Jones, 2004: 5). More recently, in talking up Drakeford, Jones' successor as First Minister, he praised him as someone 'who can effortlessly match both principles and pragmatism' (BBC, 2018a).

Jones has twice quoted Bevan's aforementioned language of priorities line, insisting that Welsh Labour has been able to put its priorities in place due to the fact it is in government. He quoted this in his first Labour Party Conference speech in 2010 and referred back to it in his final conference speech:

Nye Bevan's idea of Socialism as the language of priorities is something I mentioned in my first Conference speech as leader, and I want to return to that idea today . . . We need Labour back in power in Westminster, and in Scotland too. Because, only in power can you change the world for the better (Jones, 2018).

Jones was reminding conference of the importance of having a Labour government at Westminster to end austerity. Bevan is therefore tied to the pursuit of power and the need to apply principles in practice.

Yet, the 'language of priorities' line, a common one for Welsh Labour politicians (Senedd Cymru, 2021), and deployed to emphasise pragmatism, has seen its more radical elements stripped away. Bevan recalled that line when responding to the 1959 election defeat, emphasising that while 'you can only get your priorities right if you have the power to put them right', getting priorities correct did not mean abandoning 'our main case', which for Bevan in 1959 was public ownership (Bevan, 1959b). Priorities needed to be supported by strong socialist principles, yet this aspect of Bevan's quote is often missing when cited, demonstrative of the way in which politicians pick and choose parts of a story and, in this instance, even parts of a quote. The example from Drakeford discussed above is a rare exception.

The above pronouncements became more common after the election of Corbyn as Labour leader in 2015 (Morris, 2016), with Jones calling for unity, but also insisting that being 'radical and realistic are not political opposites'. The linking back to historical figures by Jones was extended beyond Bevan to Labour's first MP Keir Hardie. Jones pointed to the history of the Labour Party and to the 'tension that has always existed' within it:

On one side we have the pure, raw energy of our righteous outrage at the injustices we see in society – the fire that drove Hardie. The passion that got all of us into politics. And, on the other side, the hard, calculated creation (and then evolution) of a party fit for Government (Wales Online, 2015).

Jones was eager to distance Welsh Labour from Corbyn, even taking the time to mention that Labour founder Keir Hardie did not adopt 'socialist' in the title of the party as he thought it would be divisive (Wales Online, 2015).

Jones also insisted that Labour must be ‘pro-business’, seemingly a swipe at Corbyn’s left-wing positioning (BBC, 2015b). Jones again invoked Bevan, insisting that his and Hardie’s ‘power came not from their rigidity, or dogma’ but from the ‘solutions they offered to the evils and horrors that plagued society’. Jones insisted that Hardie was happy to champion responsible business owners, with that ‘quest for solutions’ giving ‘Welsh Labour our advantage in the devolution era’. He concluded:

We have built an authentic genuinely Welsh, genuinely Labour party of Government in tune with our traditional values, but equally alive to the need to build a broad base, to work for the many beyond class boundaries – and to embrace reform and modernity (Wales Online, 2015).

In addition to positioning Welsh Labour as a party steeped in radical tradition (Moon, 2017), Jones also stressed the pragmatic and practical side of governing in Wales, utilising Bevan and other historical Labour figures to do so. Welsh Labour leaders, therefore, may consider the party to be ‘Bevanite’, but it is the pragmatic Bevan, as much as the proudly socialist Bevan, that they have tended to invoke.

This pragmatism is true of Bevan: he was acutely aware of the need to think tactically and to compromise when necessary (Demont, 1990), while also insisting that capturing parliamentary power was essential (Bevan, 1952). Nevertheless, this can be overstated. Bevan himself, during the Bevanite-Revisionists battles of the 1950s, rebuked calls for more ‘pragmatism’. He warned that the ‘Labour Movement has been manoeuvred into a state of doubt about its socialism. Siren voices lull us into a condition of intellectual torpor. We are being advised to be ‘practical’ ‘pragmatical’ and ‘realistic’. He complained that Labour was being expected ‘to grope around looking for “practical” solutions to “real” problems’, summing this up as: ‘For Labour, intellectual disarmament; for private interests, loot’ (Bevan, 1956: 4). Even in 1959, by the time he had supposedly reconciled with Labour leader Gaitskell, Bevan opposed abandoning key socialist principles, in this case the commitment to public ownership. He warned against such a ‘pragmatical attitude’, predicting that political controversy would simply ‘become once more an argument between Tweedledum and Tweedledee’ (Bevan, 1959a: 5). This tension is not recognised in Welsh Labour’s references to Bevan’s pragmatism, representing a presentist way of thinking that leads to the ‘picking and choosing from a range of possible inspirations and political identities’ (Robinson, 2012: 6).

## **Rhetoric and one-party dominance**

This article has illustrated how Welsh Labour has utilised the past to portray itself as at once radical and pragmatic, as the voice of the Welsh nation and the bearers of the UK party’s traditions. As previously noted, such rhetoric has allowed Welsh Labour to present itself as a defender of Welsh interests against the UK Government, while also fending off opposition from Plaid Cymru. This success speaks to its ability to capture voters who are left-leaning but also prioritise Welsh identity (Wyn Jones, 2022) through the party’s ‘long-standing ideological and national appeals to Welsh symbols, branding and values’ (Larner et al., 2022: 6). However, the present article now considers some of the potential consequences of Welsh Labour’s engagement with the past as the dominant party in a one-party dominant system.

Referencing the past is natural for political parties, particularly the Labour Party. However, Welsh Labour finds itself in an altogether different situation than the one faced

by UK Labour. In 2021, despite suggestions it might suffer losses (Awan-Scully, 2021) and that Drakeford might even lose his seat (Bush, 2021), Welsh Labour won 30 seats, exactly half, in the Senedd-Welsh Parliament election. This victory continued Labour's dominance in Wales, which stretches back to 1922 when the party overtook the Liberals as the largest in Wales. It has not lost that position in any General or Welsh Assembly/Senedd-Welsh Parliament election since. Whereas a 'melancholic disposition' exists on the left after a series of defeats (Bonnett, 2010: 48–49), Welsh Labour is no stranger to success.

Despite the benefits of such rhetoric, there are potential dangers for Welsh Labour when attempting to maintain electoral dominance. Carrying forward outrage becomes problematic for left parties that have themselves 'become the political establishment', as Labour has in Wales (Robinson, 2012: 22). T.J. Pempel quotes Maurice Duverger's warning that 'domination takes the zest from life' and that 'every domination bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction' (Duverger, 1967, cited in Pempel, 1990: 348). If Welsh Labour does not keep pace with changes in society then it could be 'doomed to lose power' (Pempel, 1990: 348). And, in what should be heeded as a warning for a party that has been in power uninterrupted for over 20 years, Pempel argues that most parties go through 'processes of self-criticism and reorientation', but there is less incentive for this in parties in power for such a long period (Pempel, 1990: 348–349). Whereas defeat in 2010 led to much reflection within the Labour Party at a UK level (Robinson, 2017), Welsh Labour has not had to reflect in the same way. In fact, during his leadership campaign Mark Drakeford declared himself as a 'bridge' to the next generation of Welsh Labour politicians rather than offering something concretely new (BBC, 2018c). A discernible process of revitalisation and renewed engagement with the past has not occurred.

Welsh Labour's 2021 victory might not suggest an oncoming decline. However, in a period of political uncertainty, Welsh Labour will need to guard against complacency amid rigid ideological appeals. In 2016, Wales voted to leave the EU, while its vote share at Westminster has fallen from 54.7% to 40.9% from 1997 to 2019 (Pilling and Cracknell, 2021: 22–23). Richard Wyn Jones notes that 'far-reaching social change combined with substantial demographic shift' is fundamentally changing Welsh politics (Wyn Jones, 2019). He points to the challenges facing Welsh Labour due to changes in the socio-demographics of the country, writing that, in a country that is polarising and anglicising, it might not be possible for the party to maintain its 'traditional support-base among the Welsh and Welsh British' while 'also addressing its strikingly low levels of support among the electorally significant English British' (Wyn Jones, 2019). In what is a potential warning for Welsh Labour, the Conservatives increased its vote share and number of seats in the most recent Senedd election, perhaps indicating demographic changes.

When fighting increasingly hostile ideological battles, Welsh Labour cannot assume that political attitudes will remain fixed. As party affiliation declines, 'parties' institutional pasts become further removed from the mainstream cultural memory of the nation' (Robinson, 2012: 5). Jobson notes the stultifying impact of nostalgia in shaping a politics for the present. Referring to New Labour's engagement with the past, Jobson highlights that its politicians, as well as political commentators, saw nostalgia as preventing the party from modernising and appealing to a changing electorate and shifting socio-economic circumstances (Jobson, 2018). Jobson (2018: 185) points out that attachment to heroic figures might appeal to those within the party, but might not have much resonance outside it. While the NHS will long continue to be a contentious subject, will Bevan remain central to the Welsh people's outlook on the NHS? Will he continue to be honoured by the public in the same way as Welsh Labour politicians currently revere him?

Will those political traditions continue to capture voters' imaginations? Pempel wrote that 'one-party dominance can be traced to a historical period when preexisting patterns of politics were drastically shattered' (Pempel, 1990: 342). The Labour Party emerged out of the decline in liberalism and rising industrial unrest from the late 19th to early 20th century (Tanner et al., 2001). Therefore, the new social, political and economic groupings that have emerged in the past decade and ruptured UK and Welsh politics could shatter Labour's current dominance in Wales.

Welsh Labour must guard against becoming stuck in the past in its rhetoric and ideological appeals. The country has changed significantly, even in the past couple of decades. Nostalgia therefore risks wedding Welsh Labour to a past that no longer exists or is no longer recognisable (Jobson, 2018: 187). While instrumental nostalgia has been effective in Welsh Labour's case, it risks neglecting parts of the electorate who do not feel a connection with Labour's historical identity (Jobson, 2018: 192). Jobson warns that as social, political and economic circumstances change, and as British politics readjusts to developments and realignments, becoming 'imprisoned by a particular past' is dangerous (Jobson, 2018: 192). While the party system at a Welsh level appears stable, if Bevan's principles and values are truly to be defended by Welsh Labour, then it cannot rest on past laurels. It cannot simply defend institutions without mounting its own critique.

In terms of using the past to reframe policy decisions, Rhodri Morgan did attempt this. In 2009, he argued that his Welsh Government had tried to shift the focus to illness prevention, critiquing the origins of the NHS as he did so:

It is the great conundrum that the national health service is not supposed to be just a national illness treatment service – a NITS; it has to be a national health service . . . Trying to switch the emphasis to a primary-care-led approach and to a health-promotion and ill-health-prevention approach is of huge importance (The National Assembly for Wales, 2009).

When it comes to Bevan, however, this type of critique is not as evident among Welsh Labour politicians. Yet, if Bevan is invoked to mean whatever the speaker wants, then faced with a genuine ideological battle, Bevan may not be a strong enough weapon. For dominant political parties, relying on the past can lead to intellectual inertia.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to demonstrate how political parties engage with the past, particularly in the context of one-party dominance. It has shown that Aneurin Bevan has become central to Welsh Labour's rhetoric and an articulation of socialist politics. Whether as a radical politician, the founder of the NHS, or a pragmatic and practical institution builder, Bevan's legacy has become a permanent fixture in the rhetoric of Welsh Labour. A clear red line can be drawn, the party's leaders would argue, from the 1945 Labour government that gave birth to the NHS to Welsh Labour governments post-devolution. Welsh Labour is therefore the defender of Bevan's values and the inheritor of his legacy. Through an analysis of speeches and comments by senior party figures, this article has established that Welsh Labour is an interesting case study when studying the past due to the strong connection between Wales and the Labour Party as well as the nation's unique electoral context, particularly since devolution. While studies into Labour's engagement with its past have often focused on how it responds to electoral defeats, Welsh Labour has not had to go through this often painful process of renewal and revitalisation. Since 1999, it has cemented one-party dominance.

These claims to a particular history are attempts to position the party as the protector of the NHS, particularly in the face of intra- and inter-party conflict with the UK Government, by linking Bevan to a *Welsh* radical tradition, and by trying to follow Bevan's pragmatic and practical example. This strategy has arguably served Welsh Labour well. Labour support in Scotland has been seriously dented by the surge in support for the SNP (Bennett et al., 2020), the party has failed to win four consecutive elections at Westminster, and it has lost support in many of its heartlands. Yet, Wales is still a Labour stronghold. Its majorities, as the Welsh historian Gwyn Alf Williams wrote in 1985, still 'stand like Aneurin Bevan's memorial stones on the Pound above Tredegar and they are beginning to look like the Stonehenge of Welsh politics' (Williams, 1985: 303). They may have been damaged in 2019, but the 2021 Senedd election suggests they are weathering the storm.

However, this article has also sought to highlight the risks of reverence turning to empty rhetoric and complacency; that the past becomes so mainstream that it loses its radical power (Robinson, 2012: 37). Labour's dominance in Welsh politics is almost unprecedented throughout the democratic world and this one-partyism risks serious consequences. Welsh Labour has been in a position that: 'Comforting shibboleths could be maintained with little danger that they might need to be tested in the crucible of practice' (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2012: 51). We are, however, facing uncertain political times. Bevan's legacy is malleable, being interpreted in different ways to fight different battles, demonstrating the way politicians modify traditions and apply them to different circumstances (Bevir and Rhodes, 2001: 10). He can, just like certain quotes and slogans, as we have seen, be picked up and put down to serve different purposes. We have seen this not just in the way Welsh Labour politicians have invoked Bevan, but also in the way Bevan's words have been utilised by politicians belonging to competing political traditions and in some cases even different political parties, most commonly when discussing the NHS. However, by picking and choosing aspects of Bevan's character and failing to interrogate them in the light of current circumstances, there is the risk that this history becomes so distorted as to become a meaningless 'political prop, not a political force' (Robinson, 2012: 182). In contributing to the study of the past in present politics, this article has demonstrated that relying on the past to articulate a politics for unprecedented periods of political and ideological uncertainty may no longer prove advantageous for a party boasting long-term electoral dominance.

In 1985, Gwyn Alf Williams warned that while there was a hunger for the past in Wales, its invoking seemed 'rarely to be brought to bear on vulgarly contemporary problems except in terms of a merely rhetorical style which absolves its fortunate possessors from the necessity of thought' (Williams, 1985: 300). By stripping Bevan of his complexity, Welsh Labour leaders risk sterilising the vitality of his life, career, and ideas. Perhaps it is time, in a period of political crises and uncertainty, for Welsh Labour leaders to reconsider their engagement with such historical figures in a more critical way. The past can potentially act as a guide to an uncertain future: but unless it is reshaped and brought to bear on contemporary problems, drawing on the past could become a case of history repeating itself. Or, in Bevan's words, it could lead to intellectual torpor and disarmament.

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