Back to the Future?

Nye Davies

Good in a crisis but cautious when not

Since its last victory in 2005, the UK Labour Party has suffered four successive general election defeats. While there were signs of optimism after Jeremy Corbyn's better-than-expected result in 2017, the party was brought straight back down to earth two years later. Initial hopes after Keir Starmer's election as Labour leader have been dented in the wake of by-election defeats, decreasing vote shares and dwindling support in opinion polls. The party's soul-searching continues, with question-marks over Starmer's leadership and regular whispers of a future leadership contest being triggered.[1]

While things may look bleak for progressives at the UK level, in Wales, the picture appears to be rosier. In fact, Labour has won every general and devolved election in Wales since 1922, amounting to almost 100 years of electoral dominance, and making the Labour Party in Wales arguably the most successful electoral force in the world.[2] Although it has been part of coalitions, Labour has been the largest party and led every government since the creation of the Welsh Assembly in 1999 (now named the Senedd/Welsh Parliament).

In the 2021 Senedd election, Welsh Labour increased its share of the vote and its number of seats by one, winning exactly half the seats in the Senedd. This was despite

---

[1] Eaton G (2021) 'Will there be a Labour left leadership challenge to Keir Starmer?', *New Statesman*, 1 July 2021. https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2021/07/will-there-be-labour-left-leadership-challenge-keir-starmer

[2] Larner J et al (2021) 'The Welsh Election Study 2021: Some initial findings', *Wales Governance Centre*, 9 June 2021. https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2527327/WES-2021.pdf

some suggestions that the party might lose seats – including First Minister Mark Drakeford's[3] – and predictions of a coalition with Plaid Cymru.[4] In the end, however, these scenarios did not come to pass, and Labour maintained its dominance in Wales.

There are several factors that can potentially explain this success: for instance, if we look at the 2021 Senedd election in isolation, an incumbency factor can be identified due to the public's broad support for the Welsh government's actions in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic.[5] Yet, Welsh Labour's success can be charted over a much longer period and can also be explained by the way in which the party has attached itself to ideas of Welshness and radical traditions. As Jac Larner and Paula Surridge note, from the onset of devolution "Welsh Labour have succeeded in cultivating a distinctly Welsh identity".[6] In February 2021, Drakeford combined this idea of Welshness with Labour's history:

> "Social solidarity is part of what it means to be Labour, and what it means to be Welsh. Our history has taught us, from the coal field to the rugby field, that when we work together we are always stronger than any one of us can be standing alone."[7]

It is the creation of a Welsh identity that will be the focus of this article. Specifically, it will explore the rhetoric deployed by Welsh Labour politicians in attaching their party to Welsh political traditions of radicalism and progressive politics.

Emily Robinson has identified the central role that history plays in political discourse, "providing a source of lessons, warnings and precedents".[8] The past is referenced as part of a linear historical narrative, with the aim of utilising it to serve and legitimise the

---

[3] Bush S (2021) 'Is Mark Drakeford about to be destroyed by success?', *New Statesman*, 23 March 2021. https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/wales/2021/03/mark-drakeford-about-be-destroyed-success

[4] BBC News (2021) 'Welsh election: Few weeks to agree any coalition, says ex-FM Carwyn Jones', 4 May 2021. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-56984370

[5] Hayward W (2021) 'People think the Welsh Government has handled coronavirus better than the UK Government', *Wales Online*, 1 March 2021. https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/politics/mark-drakeford-boris-johnson-coronavirus-19902302

[6] Larner J and Surridge P (2021) 'Why do Welsh Labour keep winning in Wales?', *UK in a Changing Europe*, 20 May 2021. https://ukandeu.ac.uk/why-do-welsh-labour-keep-winning-in-wales/

[7] Drakeford M (2021) '"Moving Wales Forward" – Mark Drakeford's 'Spring Forward' speech', *Labour List*, 26 February 2021. https://labourlist.org/2021/02/moving-wales-forward-mark-drakefords-spring-forward-speech/

[8] Robinson E (2012) *History, Heritage and Tradition in Contemporary British Politics: Past Politics and Present Histories*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 4.

present. Making these links to the past is commonplace in Labour Party politics,[9] and Welsh Labour is no exception to this. The past not only serves to articulate a link between the party and progressive politics, but also to specifically *Welsh* values. This rhetoric has been utilised in an attempt to maintain power and fend off opposition from different corners.

'Clear Red Water' and Welsh Political Traditions

Former First Minister Rhodri Morgan is often credited with creating the 'Welsh Labour' brand, most notably in 2002 when he attempted to put 'clear red water' between Welsh Labour and New Labour in England.[10] He described himself as a "a socialist of the Welsh stripe" and set out his government's approach to policy as the "Welsh way", emphasising universalism in contrast to marketisation in England. He also linked these ideas to Wales' past, pointing to the "proud, sometimes agonising history of a nation built very largely on the efforts of working people in hard surroundings", which he insisted was the "social heritage out of which Welsh devolution has been created".

This rhetoric was not necessarily about ideological positioning, but also, as David Moon has noted, about making policy choices through "a particular nation-derived necessity", owing to "the specific circumstances and conditions of the particular Welsh polity".[11] Nevertheless, it has regularly been underpinned by references to past traditions and progressive politics, including by Morgan's successors.[12] For example, the NHS is often hailed in Welsh political discourse as an institution forged *in* Wales, representing Welsh principles of community and collectivism.[13] Welsh Labour politicians, therefore,

[9] Robinson E (2017) 'Recapturing Our Traditions? The Rhetorical Shift from New to One Nation Labour (and Beyond)' In: Atkins, J. and Gaffney, J. eds. *Voices of the UK Left: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Performance of Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 39-59.

[10] Morgan R (2002) 'Clear Red Water', *Socialist Health Association*, 11 December 2002. https://www.sochealth.co.uk/the-socialist-health-association/sha-country-and-branch-organisation/sha-wales/clear-red-water/

[11] Moon D. S (2012) 'Rhetoric and policy learning: On Rhodri Morgan's 'Clear Red Water' and 'Made in Wales' health policies', *Public Policy and Administration* 28(3), p. 308. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0952076712455821

[12] Moon D (2017) 'Red Dragon FM: Carwyn Jones' 'Welsh Labour Rhetoric'', In: Atkins J and Gaffney J eds *Voice of the UK Left: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Performance of Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 123-146.

[13] Thompson S (2018) 'NHS was not solely modelled on a Welsh workmen's medical society', *The Conversation*, 3 July 2018. https://theconversation.com/nhs-was-not-solely-modelled-on-a-welsh-workmens-medical-society-98024

regularly invoke the NHS' founder Aneurin Bevan, one of Wales and Labour's most revered figures.[14] Politicians see the benefits of linking their principles to Bevan, demonstrated by Mark Drakeford's declaration that his election as Welsh Labour leader in 2018 was a victory 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".[15]

This rhetoric has even been operationalised during the Covid-19 pandemic. In a speech made in 2020, Drakeford argued that "throughout the last century it is only Labour that has delivered real and meaningful change. At those pivotal moments of our recent history it has been to Labour that people have looked to articulate a vision of a better tomorrow". Charting a line from the foundation of the NHS through to the Welsh government, Drakeford stated:

> "After the war when people wanted protection against the giants of poverty, squalor and want it was to the Tredegar model here in Wales that Labour looked to build the NHS. In the 1960s when a new generation of individuals wanted the skills and opportunity to get on in their lives it was Labour's Open University and the biggest investment in housing seen in a generation that helped transform the lives of millions of working people. And here in Wales, it was Welsh Labour that scrapped prescription charges; that protected the EMA [Education Maintenance Allowance] and developed the Future Generations Act. Labour has always been the party of change."[16]

This appeal to the past also positions Labour as the hope for the future. Its 2021 manifesto *Moving Wales Forward*[17] promised to create a "sustainable, exciting Wales of the future, built on the values that make us the nation we are". History is used in this instance to "recover and remember past struggles and oppressions and to carry forward

---

[14] *BBC* (2004) 'Bevan is ultimate Welsh hero', 1 March 2004. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/3523363.stm

[15] Shipton M (2018) 'Drakeford's 'fairer nation' pledge after winning Welsh Labour vote', *Western Mail*, 7 December 2018, pp. 4-7.

[16] Drakeford M (2020), '"Socialism in action" – Mark Drakeford's Welsh Labour Together speech', *Labour List*, 22 October 2020. https://labourlist.org/2020/10/socialism-in-action-mark-drakefords-welsh-labour-together-speech/

[17] Welsh Labour (2021), 'Moving Wales Forward: Welsh Labour Manifesto 2021'. https://movingforward.wales/documents/WEB-14542_21-Welsh-Labour-Manifesto_A5.pdf

the outrage necessary to reshape the present and future".[18]

As well as positioning Welsh Labour as a progressive party, this rhetoric also serves to project it as *the* party of Wales. As a result, Welsh Labour can defend itself on a variety of fronts, both against the Conservative Party, by attacking it for being against Welsh and progressive values, and against Plaid Cymru, by capturing Welsh identifying voters[19] and accusing it of 'divisive nationalism'.[20] As a result of one-party dominance, Welsh Labour is able to remake the politics of the country in its own image, both benefitting its supporters and weakening its opponents.[21] Opposition parties are then forced to compete on Welsh Labour's terrain.[22]

The Past and the Present

Caveats are needed, however, when we consider that the rhetoric has not always been matched in reality. The Welsh government has not always followed its radical and progressive intentions, demonstrated by its policy of providing subsidies to large multinational companies such as Aston Martin[23] (introduced by Drakeford in a 'for your eyes only' 007 parody[24]), which later announced significant job losses.[25] In fact, Drakeford's predecessor Carwyn Jones invoked the spirit of Labour founder Keir Hardie in 2015 to argue that Welsh Labour needed to be 'pro-business',[26] a questionable appeal to a radical socialist politician.

This gap is further evidenced by lived experiences of Wales' economy. A report by the

---

[18] Robinson 2012, p. 22.

[19] Larner and Surridge 2021; Larner et al 2021.

[20] Davies N (2020) 'Drakeford, Nationalism and Welsh Political Traditions', *Thinking Wales*, 20 May 2020. https://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/thinking-wales/drakeford-nationalism-and-welsh-political-traditions/

[21] Pempel T.J (1990) 'Conclusion: One-Party Dominance and the Creation of Regimes', In: Pempel T.J ed *Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes*. London: Cornell University Press, p. 334.

[22] Davies N (2016) 'Assembly Election 2016: Bevan Battlegrounds', *IWA*, 28 May 2016. https://www.iwa.wales/agenda/2016/05/assembly-election-2016-bevan-battlegrounds/

[23] Meechan B (2018) 'Aston Martin's £19m from Welsh Government', *BBC News*, 3 October 2018. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-45737311

[24] https://twitter.com/fmwales/status/1203016476317376512

[25] ITV Wales (2021) 'Aston Martin to 'cut 200 jobs' at site in St Athan', 10 March 2021. https://www.itv.com/news/wales/2021-03-10/aston-martin-to-cut-200-jobs-at-site-in-st-athan

[26] Williamson D (2015) 'Carwyn Jones says Welsh Labour can honour Keir Hardie's legacy by winning power as he calls for unity ahead of conference', *Wales Online*, 25 September 2015. https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/politics/carwyn-jones-says-welsh-labour-10134351

Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that pre-pandemic, "almost a quarter of people in Wales were in poverty (700,000) living precarious and insecure lives", including 3 in 10 children.[27] It must be acknowledged, however, that the Welsh government's attempts to follow a progressive agenda have been hampered by Wales' devolution settlement. This has led to a story of Welsh devolution that, in policy terms, has been "pretty unimpressive".[28] Even still, these figures do not reflect the aims of a government with progressive intentions.

These examples are emblematic of the dangers of presentism, an approach to the past that involves the picking and choosing of history in order to serve the present. When a party with a radical history becomes the party of the establishment, this history can become so generalised that it loses its radicalism.[29] While references to the past are useful, reigniting the struggles of old rings hollow when ambitious action to meet present struggles is lacking.

Despite these issues, Welsh Labour has demonstrated the potential value of utilising the past and adapting rhetoric, image and language to national politics. As a result, the party has become a catch-all party in Wales, attracting support from a variety of different identities and interests.[30] This contrasts with the fortunes of Labour in Scotland, where the party has failed to articulate a 'Scottish' brand of Labour politics,[31] as well as in England, where, as Ailsa Henderson and Richard Wyn Jones argue, Keir Starmer needs to take identity seriously if he is to successfully respond to the growing force of Englishness.[32] Welsh Labour has shown that articulating progressive values in nation-bounded terms, as well as invoking traditions, myths and symbols that resonate with

[27] Matejic P (2020) 'Poverty in Wales 2020', *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, 2 November 2020. https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-wales-2020

[28] Wyn Jones R and Larner J (2020) 'Progressive home rule?', *Progressive Review* 27(3), Winter 2020, pp. 235-245. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/newe.12221

[29] Robinson 2012, pp. 37-41.

[30] Larner et al 2021.

[31] Bennett S et al (2020), 'Labouring under a delusion? Scotland's national questions and the crisis of the Scottish Labour Party', *Territory, Politics Governance*. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21622671.2020.1743204?journalCode=rtep20

[32] Henderson A and Wyn Jones R (2021) 'Englishness: The Political Force Transforming Britain', Oxford: Oxford University Press; Wyn Jones R and Henderson A (2021) 'Like it or not, Keir Starmer will not win without England', *Prospect*, 23 April 2021. https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/keir-starmer-english-nationalism-union-wales-scotland-labour-party-snp-devolution

.

the public imagination, can help to construct this type of distinct identity. The past can be utilised in service to the present.