

1859 and All That

The enduring failure of Welsh Conservatism

1859: the year of the Austro-Sardianian war; the establishment of Queensland in Australia; and the first chiming of Big Ben. Lincoln's election as U.S. President was still a year away; Queen Victoria's reign was only one-third completed.

1859 was also the last year, to date, when the Conservatives' general election vote share in Wales exceeded that in England. At *every* subsequent election, the Tories have done worse in Wales.

The direct consequence of enduring Conservative failure has been a persistently lopsided electoral politics in Wales. During the latter 19th century and early years of the 20th, the obverse of Tory weakness was Liberal strength: from 1885 until the last pre-war election in December 1910, the Liberals won a majority of Welsh votes and seats at every election. Even in difficult years across the UK, like the sweeping Conservative victories of 1886, 1895 and 1900, the Liberals remained supreme in Wales.

In retrospect, harbingers of change can be seen in the two 1910 elections. Five Welsh Labour MPs were elected in both. And in the latter, Labour's rising tide pushed the Liberals' vote share below 50 percent, a level it would never again attain. The divisions that rendered the Liberal party after 1916 were felt as much in Wales as elsewhere. These splits helped the substantial 1918 franchise expansion feed not Liberal strength, as pre-war observers might have expected, but instead boost Labour.

With hindsight, Labour's rise can appear inevitable. That wasn't so at the time, and Wales (and Britain as a whole) experienced genuine three-party politics between the wars. But this period now appears an interregnum, not only between two cataclysmic conflicts, but between two eras of one-party dominance in Wales. The 1945 election saw Labour emerge as Wales' dominant political force: winning a majority of Welsh votes and over two-thirds of MPs. Labour's 1945 landslide would not be replicated across the UK until 1997. But its dominance in Wales has proven persistent. At every subsequent general election, Labour has won most votes, and a majority of seats, in Wales.

In one respect, however, politics in Wales after 1945 was wholly consistent with previous years. Conservative weakness persisted. Across Britain as a whole the Tories have often been strong, occasionally dominant. But from 1945-2010, their average general election vote share was 16.4% lower in Wales than England.

Scotland and northern England share a contemporary antipathy to the Tories; in Scotland's case, it goes even deeper than Wales. And while northern England and Wales (though not, today, Scotland) are poorer and more working-class than the rest of England, social differences cannot remotely account for lower levels of Conservative

electoral support. Members of all major social groups in northern England, Scotland and Wales are less likely to vote Conservative than their midlands and southern English counterparts.

Differential voting patterns don't seem to follow from different socio-economic attitudes. Numerous studies indicate that people in northern England, Scotland and Wales are *not* more radical in their views. Attitudes differ only about the parties themselves, with greater hostility to the Tories in northern England, Scotland and Wales, where many appear to view Conservatives as fundamentally alien.

Yet within living memory, Conservative electoral support barely differed between southern and northern England, while a (bare) majority of Scots voted Tory in 1955. Distinct to Wales is the historical consistency of anti-Conservatism. At no general election in which a substantial proportion of the population had voting rights have the Welsh Tories ever performed strongly. Conservative weakness has persisted through vastly changed economic circumstances (Wales' substantial prosperity in the decades preceding 1914; the appalling, inter-war 'locust' years; and persisting relative poverty since 1945), and long outlasted the main social movements argued to have created and underpinned it (non-conformist Protestantism and heavy-industrial trade unionism).

Throughout the era of mass participation elections, Conservatives in Wales have been identified as a largely English party; somehow non-Welsh or even anti-Welsh in orientation. The Tories' opponents – first the Liberals, then Labour – more effectively identified themselves with ordinary Welsh people, even for many who were not 'nationalist' in terms of desiring greater Welsh political autonomy. Some fought to develop a more authentically Welsh Conservatism (notably Wyn Roberts, Welsh Office minister under Thatcher and Major, who produced the 1993 Welsh Language Act.) But these efforts were undermined in the late-1980s and 1990s by the appointment of several Secretaries-of-State with little connection to (and in one instance, no sympathy for) Wales. It didn't help that the Tories' campaign for the first Welsh Assembly elections in 1999 was hostile to devolution and (it sometimes appeared) the Welsh language. Things only improved after several Welsh Tories (notably Nick Bourne, National Assembly leader from 1999-2011) embraced devolution and sought to advance a more positive Welsh Conservative agenda. The 2010 general election saw the lowest post-war gap in Tory vote share between England and Wales (at 13.5%); the 2011 National Assembly election produced the Conservatives best-ever result, overtaking Plaid Cymru to become the main opposition party.

Modest recent improvements in Welsh Conservative fortunes do not, however, overturn decades of one-party domination. Welsh politics remains seriously lop-sided. Even prior to devolution, this mattered for political life in Wales. Control of the Welsh Office periodically changed hands, but sustained Labour electoral dominance produced organisational stagnation – highly uncompetitive elections in most areas did nothing to

sustain vibrant party organisations. But one-party dominance now matters directly for the government of Wales. By 2016, the Assembly will have completed four full terms, with no period of non-Labour government. The entire menu of options thus far has been Labour governing by itself, or Labour as senior coalition partner. The enduring weakness of Welsh Conservatism has substantially attenuated the centre-right's contribution to politics and policymaking in Wales. And, alongside Plaid Cymru's failure to sustain a serious challenge to Labour since 1999, it means that an end to Labour hegemony in Wales remains elusive.

Further Reading

The topic of this essay, as Welsh politics in general, is sparsely analysed. Richard Wyn Jones et al, 'Why do the Conservatives always do (even) worse in Wales?' *British Elections and Parties Review* (2002) 12: 229-245, explores the Welsh Conservatives' long-standing electoral travails in more detail. Peter Kellner, 'Why Northerners Don't Vote Tory' (<http://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/10/21/why-northerners-dont-vote-tory/>) considers the Tories' more recent difficulties in northern England. Ian MacAllister, 'The dynamics of one-partyism', *Llafur* (1980) 3: 79-89 was written over thirty years ago, but remains relevant to understanding the implications of one-party domination for party politics in Wales.