

1859 and all that: the enduring failure of Welsh Conservatism

Roger Scully

1859: the year of the Austro-Sardinian war; the establishment of Queensland in Australia; and the first chiming of Big Ben. Lincoln's election as US 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 later nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth, the obverse of Tory weakness was Liberal strength. Even in difficult years, 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, the Liberals' vote share fell below 50 per cent, a level it would never again attain. The divisions that

rended the Liberal Party after 1916 helped the substantial 1918 franchise expansion feed not Liberal strength, as pre-war observers might have expected, but Labour instead. With hindsight, Labour's rise can appear inevitable. That wasn't so at the time, and Wales (indeed 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 the most votes, and a majority of the seats, in Wales.

But whoever has been strong in Wales, for over 150 years the Conservatives have been weak. From 1945 to 2010, their general election vote share was an average of 16.4 percentage points lower in Wales than England.

And while the Conservatives now do badly in other parts of the UK (such as Scotland and the north of England), within living memory Tory support barely differed between southern and northern England while a (bare) majority of Scots voted Conservative in 1955. Distinct to Wales is the historical consistency of anti-Conservatism. For almost as long as they have been able to vote, Welsh voters have shunned the Tories.

Conservative weakness has persisted through vastly changed economic circumstances. Wales was relatively prosperous in the decades preceding 1914, suffered in the appalling, inter-war 'locust' years, and has struggled with relative poverty ever since. Antipathy to the Conservatives has also long outlasted the main social movements that, some have argued, created and initially sustained it, such as

non-conformist Protestantism, which opposed the Conservatives as the party of the Anglican church, and the industrial trade unions, which opposed the Conservatives as the party of capital.

While Wales may be poorer and more working-class than the rest of England, these social differences cannot remotely account for this exceptional voting pattern. Members of all major social groups in Wales (as, indeed, now in Scotland and northern England) are less likely to vote Conservative than their midlands and southern English counterparts.

Nor is Welsh exceptionalism a product of attitudes. Numerous studies indicate that people in Wales (and, again, in Scotland and northern England) are *not* more radical in their views than the bluer parts of England. Attitudes differ only about the parties themselves, with many in all of these regions appearing to view Conservatives as fundamentally alien.

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, their limited electoral successes in Wales being confined almost entirely to the most heavily 'anglicised' areas. The Tories' opponents – first the Liberals, then Labour – more effectively identified themselves with ordinary Welsh people, including the many who were not 'nationalist' in terms of desiring greater Welsh political autonomy.

Some, in recent decades, have 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 Roberts's efforts were undermined in the late '80s and '90s by the appointment of several Secretaries of State with little connection to (and, in one instance, very obviously no sympathy for) Wales. Nor were Welsh perceptions of the Tories obviously improved by their campaign for the first Welsh Assembly elections

in 1999, which evinced continuing hostility to devolution and also the Welsh language. Things only began to improve somewhat 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 per cent) and the 2011 National Assembly election produced the Conservatives' best-ever result, overtaking Plaid Cymru to become the main opposition party.

Yet long-standing perceptions can be difficult to shift. Even in 2011, survey evidence showed that while Labour scored strongly in terms of perceived concern for all major social groups in Wales, the Conservatives were viewed as particularly concerned with the interests of the English. Moreover, the modest recent improvements in Welsh Conservative fortunes do not overturn many decades of one-party domination. Welsh politics remains seriously lop-sided.

Even prior to devolution, one-party dominance mattered for political life in Wales. Control of the Welsh Office periodically changed hands, but sustained Labour electoral supremacy produced organisational stagnation – highly uncompetitive elections in most areas did nothing to uphold vibrant party organisations. And one-party dominance now matters more 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 policy-making 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, like Welsh politics in general, is sparsely analysed. ‘Why do the Conservatives always do (even) worse in Wales?’ by Richard Wyn Jones et al (*British Elections and Parties Review*, 2002) explores the Welsh Conservatives’ long-standing electoral travails in more detail. Ian MacAllister’s ‘The dynamics of one-partyism’ (*Llafur*, 1980) was written over thirty years ago, but remains relevant to understanding the implications of one-party domination for party politics in Wales. Peter Kellner’s ‘Why Northerners Don’t Vote Tory’ considers the Tories’ more recent (but similar) difficulties in northern England.