



ESRC Devolution & Constitutional Change Programme



PUBLIC OPINION, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND DEVOLUTION

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INTRODUCTION

We are now approaching the end of the first term of the devolved National Assembly for Wales. This is therefore a highly appropriate juncture, in the context of the wider discussion here today on devolution in Wales, to review some of the evidence that the team based at Aberystwyth has gathered about public opinion in Wales. We examine the following matters:

- The development of Welsh voters' views about the government of Wales since the desperately close referendum result of September 18th, 1997;
- Voters expectations up until 1999 as to what the Assembly would deliver – and how they feel now on the basis on a few years' experience;
- Address some puzzles arising out of these findings; and
- Finally, consider the impact of devolution on National Identities in Wales. Put simply, has devolution made the people of Wales feel more 'Welsh' and less 'British'?

In discussing these matters, we draw on evidence from three major surveys, conducted after the 1997 Devolution Referendum, the 1999 National Assembly Election, and the 2001 UK General Election. (These surveys were all funded by the ESRC, conducted by the National Centre for Social Research, and co-directed by Professor Anthony Heath and Richard Wyn Jones). We will also mention findings of more qualitative, focus-group work that the Aberystwyth team has co-ordinated for the Electoral Commission.

1. CONSTITUTIONAL PREFERENCES IN POST-DEVOLUTION WALES

First, then, we examine public attitudes to devolution and the constitutional position of Wales. We need to recall that only around a quarter of the Welsh electorate supported the establishment of an Assembly in the 1997 referendum. The majority in favour was a bare 0.3% of the eligible electorate. The turnout in the 1999 Assembly election was also unimpressive (Scully et al, 2002). All of this has served to put into question the legitimacy of the devolved body.

In Table 1, we report evidence from the three major surveys of the Welsh electorate conducted in recent years about the constitutional preferences of the people of Wales.¹ A number of salient points emerge from this table. This first is that an elected Assembly has never favoured by a majority of the electorate. While it was the most popular constitutional position in the immediate aftermath of the first NAW election, even then barely a third of the electorate thought this the best way to govern Wales. However, while an Assembly has not increased in popularity, support for a more powerful institution, a Welsh Parliament with tax-raising and law-making powers, has increased substantially since the referendum. In 1997 this option was favoured by fewer than one in five of the electorate; by 2001, support for a Welsh Parliament had more than doubled, and this was, by some distance, the most favoured constitutional position among Welsh voters. Alongside the growth in support for a Parliament, the proportion of respondents wishing to see a return to the pre-devolutionary status quo has dwindled significantly.

TABLE 1: CONSTITUTIONAL PREFERENCES (%) IN WALES, 1997, 1999 AND 2001

<i>Constitutional Preference</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>
Independence	14.1%	9.6%	12.3%
Parliament	19.6%	29.9%	38.8%
Assembly	26.8%	35.3%	25.5%
No elected body	39.5%	25.3%	24.0%
<i>Weighted N</i>	641	1173	1044

Sources for this and subsequent tables: 1997 Welsh Referendum Survey, 1999 Welsh Assembly Election Survey, 2001 Welsh Life and Times Study; unless dates given, Tables are from 2001 survey.

¹ These surveys are the 1997 Welsh Referendum Survey, the 1999 Welsh Assembly Election Study, and the 2001 Welsh Life and Times Study.

These findings might be challenged on the basis that public understandings of the differences between some of these constitutional alternatives are probably quite limited. So our most recent survey also included a three-fold question that examined things slightly differently – it compared the NAW to other levels of government, and asked them which level should have most political influence over the government of Wales.

TABLE 2: MOST INFLUENCE OVER ‘THE WAY WALES IS RUN’

<i>Response</i>	<i>Does Influence</i>	<i>Ought to Influence</i>	<i>Will influence in 10 yrs</i>
National Assembly	17.0%	56.2%	42.8%
UK Government	64.4%	26.3%	41.1%
Local Councils	15.5%	16.5%	4.6%
European Union	3.2%	1.0%	11.4%
<i>Weighted N</i>	1033	1047	1002

Again, these figures seem to show considerable public appetite for a more powerful institution in Cardiff. Although the levels of support for devolution lag behind those in Scotland (where 71% favour the Scottish Parliament being most powerful), they still indicate a perhaps surprising degree of public support for the Assembly. Devolution may not quite be the ‘settled will’ of the Welsh people, but it is certainly a lot closer to being so than in 1997.

2. DELIVERY: THE POLICY ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE ASSEMBLY

If devolution has come to be more widely accepted, why is that? Two, rather contrasting, interpretations suggest themselves:

- If one accepts the evolutionary logic of Ron Davies' oft-quoted statement that 'devolution is a process and not an event', one might view the figures as showing that the Assembly has been a success – it has used its powers well and this inspired confidence in the voters to support transferring further powers from Westminster to Cardiff Bay.
- An alternative interpretation is people think the Assembly has made little difference whatsoever, has performed poorly and cannot effectively govern unless it is accorded greater powers.

A battery of questions in our 1999 and 2001 surveys allow us to probe these competing explanations.

In 2001, respondents were asked whether devolution had improved the way Britain is governed. This question thus probes general views on the Assembly, rather than in particular policy areas. The striking feature of the responses to this question is the extent of indifference: just over one in five respondents thought that devolution had improved the way Britain is governed, while more than 60% felt that the Assembly has made no difference.

TABLE 3: IMPACT OF DEVOLUTION ON 'HOW BRITAIN IS GOVERNED'

<i>Response</i>	<i>%</i>
Improved it a lot	2.1%
Improved it a little	20.8%
Made no difference	62.3%
Made it a little worse	7.5%
Made it a lot worse	3.6%
(It is too early to tell)	3.7%
<i>Weighted N</i>	1024

Does the Assembly fare better on policy issues? What were people’s initial expectations of the Assembly, and have those expectations been met? We asked people about the ‘voice’ that the Assembly would give Wales within the UK, and whether the Assembly would give ordinary people more say in government. Answers here show a disjuncture between initial expectations and judgements on early performance. By 2001 there was a roughly equal division amongst voters who thought the Assembly had given Wales a stronger voice in the United Kingdom and those who thought that it had made no difference. The proportion thinking the Assembly had made no difference had increased from a third in 1997/1999 to almost one half of the electorate in 2001. For advocates of devolution as a renewal of democracy, these findings are particularly discouraging, as are those in the lower panel of the table. A majority of respondents in 1997 thought the Assembly would give ordinary people more say in government; by 2001 three-fifths of respondents said that the Assembly had not made any difference.

TABLE 4A: ASSEMBLY WILL GIVE/HAS GIVEN ‘WALES A STRONGER VOICE IN THE UK’

<i>Response</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>
Stronger	53.6%	63.0%	50.5%
No Difference	34.7%	32.1%	46.1%
Weaker	11.7%	4.9%	3.4%
<i>Weighted N</i>	649	1236	1062

TABLE 4B: ASSEMBLY WILL GIVE/HAS GIVEN ‘ORDINARY PEOPLE MORE SAY IN GOVERNMENT’

<i>Response</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>
More	57.3%	57.7%	35.1%
No Difference	38.0%	39.7%	61.5%
Less	4.6%	2.5%	3.4%
<i>Weighted N</i>	647	1224	1055

When one considers specific policy areas, one finds a similar pattern. As Table 5 shows, in relation to ‘standard of living’, 31% of the electorate in 1997 thought the Assembly would make a positive difference, and by 2001 a slightly greater proportion thought that the Assembly had made such a difference. In education, however, fully one half of respondents in 1997 thought the NAW would help improve standards in education. But by 2001 some 70% of electors thought the Assembly had made no difference, while only a quarter of voters believed it had improved things. A similar question about the health service in 2001 elicited a broadly similar pattern of responses to the education question.

TABLE 5A: IMPACT OF THE ASSEMBLY ON THE STANDARD OF LIVING

<i>Response</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>
Improve	31.0%	28.3%	34.7%
No Difference	56.3%	66.2%	57.4%
Reduce	12.7%	5.5%	7.9%
<i>Weighted N</i>	630	1185	1028

Table 5b: Impact of the Assembly on Education

<i>Response</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>
Improve	54.9%	45.4%	25.0%
No Difference	39.7%	51.2%	71.4%
Reduce	5.4%	3.4%	3.5%
<i>Weighted N</i>	627	1175	964

Table 5c: Impact of the Assembly on Health

<i>Response</i>	<i>2001</i>
Improve	31.0%
No Difference	63.6%
Reduce	5.4%
<i>Weighted N</i>	1042

Overall, the evidence on policy issues paints a somewhat negative picture. The good news is that relatively few voters seem to think that the Assembly has made things *worse* in any respect. The bad news, however, is that in most respects the majority view seems to be that devolution has done little or nothing to improve public services and the lives of the people of Wales.

3. RESOLVING THE PARADOX

The evidence, thus far, however, does leave us with something of a puzzle: if most people think that devolution has achieved relatively little (which they seem to) how is it that support for devolution (and for making the Assembly more powerful) appears to be on the increase?

It isn't possible to offer a definitive answer to this question, not least because our survey data lacks a 'panel' component that allows us to track the same individuals over time. However, we have some survey data that do speak to this question. In 2001, respondents were asked to what extent they trusted the UK Government/the National Assembly to act in Wales' best interests. Over 60% of respondents trusted the Assembly to act in Wales' best interests at least most of the time, compared to less than 25% (!) for the UK government (see Table 6). This suggests that there is some public perception of the Assembly being a 'champion of Wales'.

TABLE 6: TRUST IN UK GOVERNMENT/NAW TO 'ACT IN WALES' BEST INTERESTS'

<i>Response</i>	<i>UK Government</i>	<i>National Assembly</i>
Just about always	1.9%	12.1%
Most of the time	22.4%	49.2%
Trust at least most of the time	24.3%	61.3%
Only some of the time	58.7%	31.9%
Almost never	17.0%	6.7%
<i>Weighted N</i>	1058	1047

This interpretation of the survey evidence is generally reinforced by some qualitative focus group work that the Aberystwyth team, along with NOP, conducted for the Electoral Commission. The groups were concentrated disproportionately on those reporting themselves as unlikely to vote this year. Without going into this in great detail, the group discussions certainly revealed considerable ignorance about politics in general and devolution in particular; distrust of politicians was also a prominent theme. But there was general sympathy for the idea of Wales having its own National Assembly; quite a lot of comments suggesting that the Assembly was seen as more likely to attend to

Wales' needs than Westminster; and a significant undercurrent of comments indicating a belief that Wales ought to have a more powerful devolved institution along Scottish lines.

In short, although the popular view is generally that the achievements of devolution have been limited, the more dire predictions of anti-devolutionists in 1997 have not been born out: most people don't think that the roof has fallen in due to the National Assembly. And, prompted by the view that the Assembly is somewhat more attentive to Wales' interests than the UK government, public opinion seems to be moving in favour of giving the Assembly more powers – partly in order that it might then be able to 'deliver' more.

4. NATIONAL IDENTITY IN POST-DEVOLUTION WALES

The final question that we want to address is whether devolution has had any impact on the complex patterns of national identity that have long existed in Wales. Differences in national identity certainly shaped how people voted in the 1997 Referendum and the 1999 Assembly election. What about since then? Devolution has been variously posited as:

- Strengthening the sense of Welsh national identity (Jones, 2001);
- Helping to develop a more civic (rather than ethnic) sense of national identity (e.g. Ron Davies); or
- Strengthening the affinity of Wales with Britain – ‘proud to be Welsh, proud to British’ has become a Labour mantra in recent years (e.g. Paul Murphy).

Quantitative survey data is a rather crude tool for accessing many of these highly complex and subtle phenomena, but they can point to some general patterns. To look at this, we use data from the ‘Moreno’ question that allows people to indicate both a British and Welsh identity. As Table 7 shows, an exclusively Welsh sense of national identity seems to have strengthened since 1997. But there has been no decline in a strongly or exclusively British identity. Here, Wales certainly differs from Scotland, where the proportion of the electorate who view themselves as strongly or exclusively British is now very small indeed. Given that around a quarter of the Welsh electorate were actually born in England, it’s hardly surprising that things are different here. But the evidence here does provide a tentative suggestion that a polarisation in national identity may be developing in Wales.

TABLE 7: NATIONAL IDENTITIES IN WALES, 1997, 1999 AND 2001

<i>National Identity</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2001</i>
Welsh, Not British	17.2%	17.7%	24.6%
More Welsh than British	25.7%	20.7%	23.5%
Equally Welsh and British	34.3%	38.3%	29.4%
More British than Welsh	10.4%	7.8%	11.2%
British, Not Welsh	12.4%	15.5%	11.3%
<i>Weighted N</i>	660	1173	1045

An examination of generational patterns of national identification confirms that this is indeed the likely long-term direction of national identity in Wales. Table 8 reports 2001 data that disaggregates national identity by age group. As is clear, an exclusive sense of ‘Welsh’ identity is particularly strong amongst younger voters, with whom British identity (and particularly shared British and Welsh identity) is correspondingly weaker. The political implications of any such trend is, of course, another issue, which I have no time to get into now.

TABLE 8: NATION IDENTITY BY AGE COHORT

<i>National Identity</i>	<i>18-24</i>	<i>25-34</i>	<i>35-44</i>	<i>45-54</i>	<i>55-59</i>	<i>60-64</i>	<i>65+</i>
Welsh, Not British	36.7%	28.5%	27.9%	21.2%	28.7%	17.8%	16.3%
More Welsh than British	22.0%	21.2%	26.9%	26.3%	26.4%	23.3%	19.5%
Equally Welsh and British	18.3%	27.9%	24.4%	33.5%	27.6%	32.9%	36.3%
More British than Welsh	10.1%	7.3%	9.6%	10.6%	12.6%	12.3%	15.8%
British, Not Welsh	12.8%	15.1%	11.2%	8.4%	4.6%	13.7%	12.1%
<i>Weighted N = 1043</i>							

5. CONCLUSION

Virtually all actors on the political stage in Wales have found the transition to devolved government difficult.² Indeed, the simple lack of preparedness of all involved – and perhaps most conspicuously the lack of preparedness of Wales’ largest party – has proven the single most important factor shaping Welsh political life since September 1997. The voters have also had to adjust to a new situation: we have tried here to summarise some of the evidence we have on how devolution has been seen by them and how it has affected them.

² Interesting this is true of even those groups and organisations whom one might have expected to find devolution most conducive. So, for example, the Welsh language pressure group, *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (The Welsh Language Society) has found it extremely difficult to adapt its methods or goals to the new context and, for the first time in its forty year history, has found its pre-eminent position as the main campaigning group for equal status for the language challenged by *Cymuned* (Community), an organisation only founded in 2001 (Wyn Jones 2002).