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Framing Welsh identity

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Abstract

Welsh Studies as a cross-disciplinary field is growing both in Wales and beyond. Historians, sociologists, political scientists and others are increasingly collaborating in their study of the evolution of Welsh identity. This concept which was for so long monopolised and marked by a strong reference to the Welsh language and the importance of having an ethnic Welsh identity is now giving way to a more inclusive notion of what it means to be Welsh. Welsh identity has become a more open and inclusive notion since the institutional reforms brought about by devolution have anchored themselves in daily realities and subsequently in conceptual approaches to the problematizing of Welsh identity.

Résumé

Les études galloises constituent un nouveau champ inter-disciplinaire où historiens, sociologues, politologues etc., au pays de Galles même et au-delà de ses frontières, se rencontrent dans leur recherche sur l'identité galloise contemporaine. Les réformes post-dévoctionnaires ont induit des changements dans les comportements et les mentalités des Gallois, entraînant une évolution dans la définition de l'identité galloise. Cette nouvelle identité n'est plus définie par les critères ethno-linguistiques d'antan mais se situe plutôt dans une nouvelle aire où les notions de citoyenneté et d'inclusion priment.

Mots-clés

Pays de Galles, identité, problématisation, britannique, politique

1. The people and the land.

« Welsh Studies » is a field of research which is growing slowly outside Wales (particularly in North

America) while within Wales researchers and intellectuals are beginning to leave their own well-defined fields of study (geography, history, literature, sociology, politics, gender studies ...) to engage in more cross-disciplinary projects and programmes. These collaborative efforts are concentrated on investigations into Wales and Welsh identity/identities. Framing Welsh identity is thus a question which is exercising many people at present as the Welsh Assembly, by its very existence, is creating and defining its own legitimacy. One of the basic interrogations underpinning this surge of activity is the question of whether today one refers to « Welsh people » or the « people of Wales», for the tricky problem of identity based on language skills is still very much to the fore. These aspects do not arise in the case of Scotland and Scottish identity because Scotland's past as a unified kingdom, the maintained presence of its institutions, the absence of a major language problem and the strong nationalist demand for devolution make it a clearly different case to Wales. Who is Welsh?

The two intertwined, interpenetrative elements of territory and language have fashioned Welsh identity, as has the country's resulting history. Difficult terrain fashioned communities and mentalities while hindering unity. The nature of the land also determined industrial and agricultural differences and subsequent political divisions; thus the pattern and nature of nationalism and politics in Wales have hinged on factors that have been in place for centuries.

Wales covers about 21,000 sq km which represents about a tenth of the British land mass although it is home to only about 2.9 million people, roughly 5% of the total UK population. The population is concentrated along the flat coastlands especially in the south around the cities of Cardiff, the capital, Swansea and Newport, and in the narrow valleys that run down to the sea. These areas were long the site of industrial activity such as metallurgy and mining. The central high plateau, dominated by rural activities, has always made communication and transport difficult within Wales. In the centre and the north-east the low population density has played a crucial role in the survival of the language. Similarly, communication difficulties led to comparatively isolated communities being self-sufficient and even inward looking, receptive to the ideas of self help and independence fostered by Nonconformist religion, very close knit, distinguishing themselves clearly from other social units like other villages or religious groups. This tendency to identify with smaller rather than larger entities is still alive today, reflected internally in identification with a neighbourhood rather than with a town, and in Wales's outward policies, reflected in European regional affiliations.

Geography also explains in part why Wales never experienced the political unity that the kingdom of Scotland once enjoyed. Gwynfor Evans, the leading figure of modern Welsh nationalism, blamed geography and the resulting historical and political scattering of the Welsh across their country for a lack of political and national cohesion : « Ironically, one of the reasons Wales has found it difficult to obtain decentralisation is that the Welsh themselves are too decentralist to unite » (Evans 2003 : 215)

However, we could take the view that it is History that gives us the best view to framing Welsh identity for there has been a striking and sustained renaissance in the study of Welsh history over the past two generations. There was a dearth of research in this area until the 1960s when a number of authoritative historians such as Glanmor Williams, K O Morgan, and Gwyn Alf Williams at Swansea and Aberystwyth undertook a transformation of this field. These first historians were preoccupied with a need to highlight national unity and the wholeness of Wales, attempting to pinpoint « When was Wales? » (Williams 1985). Since then, institutional and social factors have prompted the rise of a group of historians who have mainly been concerned with social history and empirical, archival research, writing a history 'from below'. Some have written more from a committed, political viewpoint but what connects such eminent researchers as Chris Williams, Geraint Jenkins, Duncan Tanner, Bill Jones and John Davies is their view of themselves as « Remembrancers » (« passeurs de mémoire »).

However, while inevitably the actions of forces both inside and outside Wales (globalization, mass media, movement of people, information technology ...) are transforming Wales into a more mutable and fragmented community of peoples, Welsh history cannot be fully understood without reference to its relationship with England. The story of Wales is not so much the history of kings as the history of the people, « *y gwerin* », and of their political and cultural leaders. Since the first incursions of the English King Edward I in the late 13th century Wales has been subsumed into the history of England (the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1888 entry reads: « For ' Wales' see 'England' »), and Gwynfor Evans was adamant that ignorance of their own history was - and is – the reason why many Welsh people have been slow in coming to a sense of nationhood: « *In Wales, the weakened sense of a collective past, and, therefore, of a collective*

future, is not only due to a lack of national institutions. » (Evans 1996 : 134). His guidance and leadership of Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party, were to be driven by a strong sense of the long term cultural unity which has held the country together longer and better than any political arrangement.

The joined histories of England and Wales have been marked, since the Acts of Union in 1536 and 1542, by a symbiotic relationship that has at times been mutually beneficial but which many believe to have been mainly dominated by England to the detriment of Wales and its distinct identity. Establishing English law, excluding Welsh speakers from public office and enforcing the supremacy of Church of England were the first instances of this. A distinct Welsh identity continued to exist in matters of religion, with the growth of Puritanism in Wales, especially Methodism in the 18th century, and the Welsh language was often the vehicle of that faith. However, the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century brought an influx of Anglophone immigrants mainly to the south of the country thus contributing to the decline of the language and to a certain dilution of identity. Politically, Wales had been dominated by the Liberal party and the Radical movement but allegiance to the Labour Party and class solidarity became the political characteristics of the country during most of the 20th century. Economic depression in the 1930s and the post-war decline of industry (of which the 1984-1985 miners' strike is perhaps the most striking event) has transformed the country. Economic structures have changed as deindustrialisation has been accompanied by the arrival of light industries, service industries, the feminisation of the workforce and more prominent inward investment by British and overseas concerns. Also, religious observance has declined, as it has in the rest of Britain and this has been in parallel with the erosion of the Welsh language.

2. Gwnewch bopeth yn Gymraeg ! (do everything in Welsh).

Today approximately 600,000 people speak Welsh, which is about 20% of the population and the table below shows how the number of Welsh speakers has declined over the years.

Table 1. Numbers of Welsh speakers

year	population	% Welsh speakers
1891	1,519,000	54,4%
1911	2,421,000	43,5%
1931	2,593,000	36,8%
1961	2,644,000	26%
1991	2,891,000	18,7%
2001	2,903,085	21%

Source :Welsh Language Board, UK Office for National Statistics

This decline is easily explained by industrialization, the proximity of England and indeed globalization, and it has accelerated as modern forms of communication, TV, radio, press, and the internet have expanded. Is language therefore an element to be taken into account when attempting to define Welsh identity? The early struggle for recognition of Wales as a separate country or region and the first claims for autonomous government, and indeed the founding of Plaid Cymru, the nationalist party of Wales (1925) were based on what could be termed as mythical values surrounding Welsh cultural heritage which was intimately linked to the language. Modern consciousness of the importance of the language as an identity marker and of the danger threatened by its decline was first aroused by the poet Saunders Lewis in a 1965 BBC radio broadcast – « *Tynged yr Iaith* » (The Fate of the Language) warning of the disappearance of the language, and of specific Welsh identity. A long and sometimes violent campaign by militants from *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (The Welsh Language Society) eventually led to the passing of two laws (1967 Welsh Language Act and the 1993 Welsh Language Act) to protect and promote the language, giving it parity with English, and making the learning of Welsh obligatory in schools.

The recent increase in the number of speakers is due to efforts by the Welsh Language Board in conjunction with the Welsh Assembly's language promotion programme, *Iaith Pawb* (Language for All). The defenders of the language promote it as giving «added value» to the country, to Welsh identity and

argue that the language enjoys colossal good will and support. It is hoped that the new awareness of all things Welsh, the growth in the awareness of national identity that seems to have accompanied devolution will also promote Welsh cultural identity and the movement is inspired by the example of other countries like Finland which, in the wake of political autonomy, have come to enjoy a cultural and linguistic reinforcement. Their dream is of a truly bi-lingual Wales. This project is supported by the fact that the UK government has ratified the 1992 Council of Europe European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

The detractors believe that it is useless to promote the language as so few people really speak it. Often described as a « barbaric » language, and attacked throughout history, from the Acts of Union to the notorious « Blue Books » (the 1847 Education Report) the language is still a divisive element today among the Welsh themselves. Welsh speakers are viewed with hostility by Anglophone Welsh for they view Welsh speakers as a self-appointed elite who sideline non Welsh speakers and who reserve promotions and favours within Wales and Welsh institutions for a select few.

Nevertheless, despite the criticism of the way statistics are defined and gathered, we can confidently say that Welsh is the everyday language of about half a million people throughout Wales although its use can be tied clearly to certain areas. In 1985 Denis Balsom determined that Wales could be divided into three main language areas, according to self-identification (which has since been enhanced and modified by other researchers). Those zones were, firstly, « British Wales », which was the eastern half of Wales, the Cardiff area and Pembroke in the extreme south-west. In this zone people identified with Britain and spoke English and no Welsh. « Welsh Wales » incorporated the rest of the south-east and included the Valleys. These people identified themselves with Wales but generally did not speak Welsh. Finally, « Y Fro Gymraeg » corresponded mainly to the western half of Wales and it is the area where the population identify with Wales and also speak Welsh. The last two areas have shared similar voting patterns in the 1997 referendum and in Assembly elections (Williams 2003 : 10).

The language is today gaining ground and more speakers in urban areas such as Cardiff and Swansea and in Monmouthshire and Glamorgan. It is most under threat in the north and the west due to tourists, English retirees and second home buyers and to the cities of Liverpool and Manchester social services' « dumping » of problem families in the struggling guesthouses on north coast resorts like Rhyl and Llandudno.

3. Politics in Wales.

The language issue is inextricably linked to politics and in particular to the story of Plaid Cymru. The party was however long associated with a romantic, idealized view of an agrarian past, with a subsequently strong ethnic approach to the question of Welshness. In fact the party's problem in capturing votes was that it was (and to some extent still is) seen as « too Welsh » and therefore off-putting to some voters. Long associated with Gwynfor Evans, it sprang up in the line of a certain renaissance and a revival of Welsh sentiment, the view of Wales as a nation. Its demands for autonomy eventually shook the statewide Conservative and Labour parties, and following Gwynfor Evans's historic election as the nationalist MP for Carmarthen in 1966 the first moves were made to mollify the nationalists. We can say briefly that the first ideas for devolution were made by the Labour government in the late 60s in a context of constitutional reform but also to save Labour seats in Wales (and Scotland).

There is some truth then in saying that, politically, the Labour party has also been instrumental in shaping Welsh identity. This happened initially through the support that Labour received in Wales when the Liberal party lost ground to it and when Labour came to represent class solidarity above all, which persisted throughout the latter half of the 20th century. However, there may also be some truth in saying that since 1997 New Labour has been instrumental in helping to carve out a new identity for the Welsh. Comparing the results of the two referendums held in Wales helps to remind us of how little enthusiasm there was for the proposals set out in the 1978 Wales Act :

Table 2

Wales referendum results 1 March 1979	turnout 58.8%
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« Do you want the provisions of the Wales Act 1978 to be put into effect? »			
YES	243,048 votes	20.2% voters	12 % electorate
NO	956,330	79.8%	46%

Source : British election survey/ BBC Political research unit.

Some of the reasons for this defeat in Wales include the fact that the amendment requiring 40% of the electorate to approve of the contents of the Wales Act and the fact that this legislation was framed beforehand. The economic and social climate of the time (the 1978-79 «winter of discontent») created a climate of mistrust in the government. Issues had become very polarized and state-wide there was dominating interest for Scotland. Fears of what devolution would entail included the break up of Britain and while Anglophones feared domination by Welsh speakers, those in the Welsh-speaking north were disgruntled by the idea that politics would be dominated by Anglophones in Cardiff. In any case, the Welsh context was diluted by British party politics, especially by internal Labour wrangling. Prominent anti-devolutionists included the future party leader, Neil Kinnock. However, eighteen years later British politics, Welsh politics and the population of Wales had evolved and changed.

Table 3

Wales referendum results 18 September 1997		turnout 50.1%	
I agree that there should be a Welsh Assembly	559,419 votes	50.3% voters	
I do not agree that there should be a Welsh Assembly	552,698	49.7%	

Source : British election survey/ BBC Political research unit.

3. The "quiet earthquake".

What had happened between the two referendums to explain the difference in the outcome? The reasons are various and complex but are deemed to have been influenced by the earlier, favourable vote in Scotland on 11 September 1979. While the devolution measures were virtually identical to those of 1979, the positive outcome has often been attributed to eighteen years of Conservative government in Westminster while support for the Tories dwindled in Wales. However, this period witnessed the rise in the number and prominence of institutions put in place by both Labour and Conservative governments which were allowing the development of a civic national identity in Wales which had created an increasingly strong «proto- State». Some of these institutions are quite venerable, such as the National Library and the University (1907). Cardiff was officially designated as the capital city in 1955, the Welsh Office was created in 1964 and the Welsh Development Agency in 1976. Meanwhile other bodies sprang up such as the Welsh Arts Council, the Wales Tourist Board, the Sports Council for Wales, the Welsh TUC and the Welsh CBI, the Welsh Football Association, the Welsh Rugby Union, the Welsh National Opera, etc., etc. Although Wales never knew a constitutional convention like Scotland these institutional creations have helped to create and develop a sense of nationhood.

However, and perhaps just as importantly, the 1997 referendum results also point to the fact that a generational shift had taken place. A new population voted, reflecting demographic, economic and even psychological changes. Those under the age of 45 voted «yes» by a margin of 3 : 2 (Osmond 2007 : 20). Although there were 87,000 fewer voters in the second referendum there was a massive shift in the number of «yes» votes, up by 316,365 on the 1979 result while the «no» votes dropped by 404,632. Was this in fact a vote of confidence in Wales and Welshness and an affirmation of a new Welsh identity? John Osmond thinks so especially as regular polls have revealed that since 1997 the constitutional preference of a growing number of Welsh people is for a Welsh Parliament (1997 :19.6%; 1999: 29.9%; 2001 : 38.8%; 2003 : 37.8%; 2006 : 42.1%. Osmond, 2007 : 21).

The creation of the aforementioned institutions may have gone some way towards helping to shape a distinct Welsh identity within the British framework but an important characteristic of many of them was that they were «quangos» or quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations, which created a series of problems because they were run by appointees or co-opted members in unelected bodies that were unaccountable to the electorate. The resulting «democracy deficit» contributed to the specific political

atmosphere of the long period of Conservative government (1979 – 1997). « *The case for a measure of democratic control over Welsh life by the people of Wales was energized not retarded by the political, industrial and economic traumas of the Thatcherite years* » (Williams 2000 : 241)

Margaret Thatcher's affirmation that « there is no such thing as society » (31 October 1987) infuriated the communitarian values of the Welsh, forced women in particular out of the shadows to tell their stories and prompted the Welsh historians referred to earlier, and others, into more fruitful approaches to their discipline and research. Thus history, like politics, has been caught up in issues of religion, language and nationality in Wales and in the current debate over identity or rather identities. Perhaps the plural should be preferred because many feel and know today that there is no longer a homogenous Welsh identity. Since the end of the 1980s, in Wales there has arisen a kind of consensus, a move away from previous, narrow definitions of Welsh identity based on ethnic criteria of language and culture, which had maintained divisions within Welsh society, to a new kind of collective identity:

The Welsh are in the process of being defined not in terms of shared occupational experience or common religious experience or the survival of an ancient European language or for contributing to the Welsh radical tradition, but rather by reference to the institutions that they inhabit, influence or react to. This new identity may lack the ethical and political imperatives that characterized Welsh life for two centuries but it increasingly appears to be the only identity available. (Williams 2000 : 240).

It was becoming clear that many of the characteristics that marked out the people of Wales were competing and conflictive and they were gradually being unmasked as anachronistic and misleading. Thus, if a new identity was to be generated that could accommodate all those who had made Wales their home, all those who, whatever their birthplace, ethnic background, linguistic ability or even self definition, constituted the « Welsh people » it would and will have to be pluralist, inclusive and constructed on a basis of citizenship rather than on the possession of certain « essential » attributes, attitudes or beliefs. Wales needs to establish clearly a new civic identity as opposed to the old ethnic identity. Similarly Plaid Cymru had to rethink its image and its policies because the people of Wales could not recognize themselves in the Party's original, narrow, language based definitions. This new conception of identity was what underpinned Ron Davies' view of devolution. As Labour's first post-devolution Secretary of State for Wales he was known as «the architect of devolution» and had famously stated that « *devolution is a process not an event* » (Davies : 1999). Ron Davies further articulated the concept that Welsh identity was mutating and moving forward, emphasizing the fact that it had to be an inclusive identity, for all the people who lived in Wales, whatever their origin or background (Davies 1999 : 6-7).

This very recent, shifting nature of Welsh civic and cultural identities goes some way to explaining changes in popular and political attitudes to devolution from 1979-97 and why and how language ceased to be such a decisive issue. But even at the present moment the debate is still moving and shifting in focus and not just in the world of politics or in academia. In the world of culture too Wales is re-shaping itself, re-defining itself, re-inventing itself, partly in reaction to the new politics. There is a wide cultural renaissance within post devolution Wales that is epitomized in Peter Lord's *Imaging the Nation* (2000). In the three volumes of this work he set out to establish and recover the visual heritage of the country as a narrative of Wales. For Peter Lord, and others, the notion of cultural regeneration accompanies that of political rebirth :

It has often been alleged that a national consciousness heavily conditioned by the needs of differentiation from a dominant neighbour is a characteristic Welsh weakness. As a result of the political and economic decline of that neighbour, a complementary growth in our own self-confidence and a wider change in perceptions of nationality, it is the hope of many at the beginning of the twenty-first century that this essentially colonized state of mind may at last be transcended. (Lord 2000 : 9)

This observation is particularly interesting because of the reference to « colonialism » because academic discussion has recently embarked on a debate, on Welsh identity and problematizing Wales as to whether or not Wales can be qualified as a «post-colonial» country or not. Can it be qualified as a colony of England and is it now in a period after colonialism, witnessing the withdrawal of imperial forces? Or is Wales a case for «postcolonial» studies, where disparate forms and representations, reading practices and values circulate across the barrier between colonial rule and national independence? (Aaron / Williams : 2005).

Thus politicians, historians and cultural commentators are coming together in agreement that a new Welsh identity should accommodate all those who made Wales their home whatever their birthplace, ethnic

origin, linguistic competence or even their self defined identification. The basis of citizenship should be pluralistic and inclusive and not depend on possession of essential (internal) attributes, attitudes or beliefs. This reflection is also accompanied by the realisation that the concept of the nation-state is now out of date and is no longer a viable goal for those who would wish to see a greater autonomy for Wales. Greater visibility within a European framework is deemed by many to be a more realistically achievable aim, given the fuzzy, unclear nature of Wales's borders – internal and external - and the implications of the very close relations with England, both the recognized and the unacknowledged.

4. A new identity.

Nevertheless, despite this progressive and dynamic reflection and investigation, the answer to the original question, « Who is Welsh? » still remains elusive. Those who have carried out enquiries into Welsh identity have found it shifting and difficult to pin down. It is less positively experienced than in Scotland.

The concept of national identity was one examined by the Welsh Election Study Survey in 1979 which asked respondents to identify themselves as «British, Welsh, English or whatever» and they found that among those who voted «Yes» in the referendum 76% of them identified themselves as Welsh and 19% said they were British (Foulkes *et al.* 1983 : 210). «No» voters were 50% Welsh and 45% British. However, among those who declared they were normally Labour supporters and also Welsh identifiers only 33% voted in favour of the referendum proposal. This result shows that in 1979 class solidarity, expressed in the support for Labour, was stronger than a Welsh national identity.

However, by the time the 1997 referendum was held more sophisticated analyses showed rather different results. Earlier in the May 1997 general election the people of Wales had elected candidates exclusively from the three parties committed to some measure of devolution and no Conservative MPs were elected to Westminster. It was discovered that most « Yes » votes came from the Western, Welsh-speaking areas and the Welsh-thinking former industrial Valleys. Also, young people had voted in favour of the Welsh Assembly, but it is not sure whether this indicated a growing real consciousness of Welshness or not. Interestingly, a large number of «Yes» votes were recorded in Monmouthshire, the county on the English border which has been attached to both England and Wales at different periods. Further research carried out in Wales 1997, 1999 and 2001, using the mobile « Moreno » scale of self-identification, revealed that a growing number of people identified themselves as Welsh, (though there was no drop in the number who also defined themselves as British). In 1997, 42.9% identified themselves as « Welsh » or « more Welsh than British » but by 2001 this figure had risen to 48.1%. (Jones / Scully 2003). This seems to indicate a polarisation of national identity, which is stronger among younger generations. It also points to the fact that Welshness is becoming more attractive.

However, research carried out in 1998, just before the first Welsh Assembly elections, also revealed some interesting results. Richard Haesly tried to discover how national identities and « imagined communities » (Anderson 1991) are linked (Haesly 2005). According to his findings, the Welsh imagined community appears to be fundamentally more contested than the more easily forged Scottish identity. He determined that the Welsh respondents were not nationalists, and not sure if Wales is a meaningful nation before concluding that Wales is seen as a divided nation, with a thin sense of identity and a sense that Welsh history is relatively unimportant. However, the interviewees did share a strong emotional bond with Wales that replaced rather than enhanced specific ideas about the subjective meaning of contemporary Welshness. This focussed on the importance of sport and the national teams, beating England and a general anti-Englishness. These people are sure they are Welsh, but not sure what precisely Wales is or who is Welsh. He discovered a pride in the culture, but which was (or is) rather low level. Further research carried out in Flintshire in north-east Wales revealed hierarchical notions of Welshness with respondents divulging perceived degrees of «real» Welshness, (Evans 2006). Respondents self-identified as being «Welsh» but not as Welsh as someone from Aberystwyth (on the west coast) for example. The respondents seemed to acknowledge that their Welshness was an identity that was internalised but it was something that was constantly being negotiated as if living in a place on the margin of national space seems to shape conceptions of national identity in a modern national polity that is still in its early days. Contrast this with the general impression that throughout Wales there is nevertheless a very strong sense of « community » that binds the nation together (Le Disez 2005).

5. Conclusion.

Can Welsh identity be « framed » therefore? Can it in fact be pinned down or is it too diffuse and indeed multiple? Devolution and national government for Wales is helping the move towards a reinforced and inclusive sense of identity which is more specifically Welsh. Wales is shifting and changing and re-inventing itself, almost despite the Welsh themselves sometimes for the existence of a nationalistic national identity is not the same as it is in Scotland. The absence of such a type in Wales suggests that Scotland and Wales each represent a very different political environment with a differing national consciousness. If such a new, inclusive multi-faceted Welsh identity exists today then who can frame it? As Raymond Williams put it : « Who speaks for Wales? » (Williams 1971). Ten years after devolution and the creation of an all-Wales institution whose powers are slowly increasing, it has to be the National Assembly that assumes this task. Wales no longer possesses a homogenous identity and the old identity markers (language, religion...) are crumbling and disappearing. Welsh identity is becoming diverse, fragmented and multi-faceted : 2.1% of the population or 62,000 people are from ethnic minorities (2001 Census) and only the National Assembly can now hold the country together and represent Wales to and for the Welsh. In the face of globalisation and the internet, it is becoming increasingly harder to maintain cultural or national distinctiveness but Wales is shifting, changing and re-inventing itself. At a time when the Assembly is set to enjoy new legislative powers there are encouraging signs that the people of Wales are understanding the potential of the Assembly. Participation in the 2007 elections rose to 43.5 % from the low of 38% in 2003 (The Electoral Commission, 2007 www.electoralcommission.co.uk) and the voters elected a coalition government where Labour now share power with Plaid Cymru. Unprecedented and promising.

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