Why is Welsh independence suddenly being taken seriously?

There has been a remarkable rise in support for a movement advocating independence for Wales, writes Geoff Ryan

At the beginning of 2020, just before the start of the pandemic, membership of **YesCymru** stood at about 2,000. In November, *writes Geoff Ryan*, I received my membership card: Number 15,706. Membership has further increased to about 20,000 today. That is a remarkable rise in support for a movement advocating independence for Wales. Especially since it was only formed in 2016. Moreover for more than a year it has not been able to follow up on the increasingly bigger demonstrations held in Caernarfon, Cardiff and Merthyr.[i]

Polls also show a big increase in support for independence with up to 40 percent of those expressing a view saying they would vote for independence if a referendum were to be held tomorrow. In some polls a majority of Labour voters have supported independence. Young people in particular are inclined towards independence. 16 and 17 year olds are able to vote in the Senedd elections on Thursday 6 May but at the moment it is unclear to what extent this will impact on the election result.

Labour Party supporters such as Michael Sheen[ii] and Charlotte Church have come out in favour of independence. Charlotte Church's support for independence is on the front page of the first edition of **YesCymru's** free paper which has been distributed to households throughout Wales. Former Wales and Everton goalkeeper Neville Southall and sports journalist Eddie Butler are prominent supporters of independence for Wales.

At least some of the mainstream press are taking the possibility of Wexit, as Sky News dubbed it[iii], seriously. This is also being taken up outside Britain. For example both the **Irish Times** and **South China Morning Post** have featured articles on Welsh independence.[iv]

So why has support for independence suddenly mushroomed?

The first thing to note is that, contrary to the arguments of the capitalist media and sections of the Labour Party, support for some form of independence has always existed in Wales. Just before and after the First World War the South Wales Miners Federation supported a Welsh Parliament. They were joined by all the major Welsh Labour organisations.

Unfortunately the workers movement failed to put itself at the head of the fight for a Welsh Parliament, leaving it to the Liberals, so gradually the Welsh Labour movement became more 'British' in outlook the more it came to be dominated by the British Labour Party.[v] As a result devolution was rejected in a 1979 referendum and there was barely a majority for devolution when another referendum was held in 1997.

There have also been major struggles around the language question, particularly from the 1960s onwards. Despite significant victories there are still ongoing issues around the status of the Welsh language. Jacob Rees Mogg's recent description of Welsh as 'a foreign language' incensed many people in Wales. Not least because it showed an appalling ignorance on the part of this staunch British patriot of the connection between Welsh and the indigenous language of the original Britons. English, Mr Rees Mogg, with its Latin, Norman French, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian heritages is the non-native language.

The current discussion about whether of not Snowdon should

only be called by its Welsh name Yr Wyddfa is also having an impact on attitudes in Wales; particularly after the ridiculing of Welsh on a recent edition of **Have I Got News For You**. Bizarrely support for the use of Yr Wyddfa has come from the Tory supporting Telegraph.[vi] There are also campaigns for the country to only be referred to as Cymru rather than its English name.

The Wales football team reaching the semi-finals of the 2016 UEFA championship (England lost to Iceland in the last 16) and Gareth Thomas winning the Tour de France in 2018 certainly increased a sense of Welsh identity and pride. The much improved form of the Wales rugby union team, winning the 6 Nations Championship after a disastrous 2020, has also strengthened Welsh national feelings.

But all these issues have reinforced a move that was already underway towards greater support for independence in Wales. They did not create it. What then are the major reasons for the rise in support for independence?

Basically there are 4 main reasons for the growth of the independence movement in Wales:

1. Brexit
2. Covid
3. Westminster interference
4. Scottish independence

1) Brexit

Unlike Scotland a majority of voters in Wales supported Brexit. Indeed, without that Welsh support Brexit would have been clearly revealed as the little Englander project it was. In fact if Wales had also voted to remain the break-up of the UK would probably have accelerated. Consider if a government in Westminster had tried to go ahead with Brexit against the wishes of three of the four constituent parts of the United

Kingdom. It is the effect of Brexit on Wales, and Welsh farmers in particular, that has led to a change in views, with probably a majority now wishing they had voted remain. Many farmers have accused the Westminster government of a 'Brexit betrayal' after the farming sector's 2020 budget was slashed by £95 million, despite the Tories having promised a year earlier to maintain agricultural development funding. Also the hostility of farmers has also increased because they have not received much of the money they were promised. In fact the Tories' response is to centrally control all funding, by-passing the Welsh Labour government. This hostility to the devolved administration has undoubtedly increased support for a weakening of ties with England.

2) Covid 19

The Welsh Labour government has not performed massively better than the Johnson government in terms of reducing deaths from Covid. Nevertheless in every poll Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford is credited with performing much better than Johnson. Indeed Johnson is seen negatively in every poll in Wales. What the pandemic has revealed to much wider layers of Welsh society is that the devolved government has far greater powers than most people thought and that it can use them independently of Westminster. By taking control of dealing with the pandemic the Labour government in Wales has been able to demonstrate the benefits of devolved government (even within the limits currently in place). This is the main reason why Boris Johnson regretted allowing the devolved governments to take responsibility for the Covid crisis. At the same time he refuses to talk to the government in Cardiff.

And the Labour government has been able to take alternative roads to the Westminster government. **Find, Test, Track, Trace, Isolate** in Wales has been carried out by the public sector, unlike in England where vast sums have been handed over to Serco to run a frankly useless system. The Welsh government

has been more inclined to act on the advice of scientists and take measures to reduce, or try to reduce, the spread of the virus. Unlike the government in Westminster, which refused to stop people living in areas with high levels of Covid travelling to Wales.

Certainly the Welsh government can be criticized for its slowness in reacting at the start of the pandemic, its tardiness in making the wearing of masks compulsory in shops and on public transport, its ending the autumn fire-break too quickly and several other mistakes. But the Labour government's failings are certainly far less than those of the Tories in Westminster and, despite the trolls on **WalesOnline** the majority of people are inclined to support Drakeford's measures. But most importantly in increasing willingness to consider independence is the fact that the Welsh government was able to take measures and was the vehicle for communicating with the people of Wales.

3) Westminster Interference

Interference from Westminster predates Johnson becoming PM. It was Theresa May's government that refused to support the Swansea bay barrage scheme on the grounds of cost. At one and the same time this showed how dependent Wales was on Westminster and how little the Tory government cared about the people of Wales or the environment. Under Johnson that has become even more apparent. Although the Welsh government rejected the proposed M4 relief road on environmental grounds (as well as cost) Johnson has declared it must go ahead.

In the early days of the pandemic **BBC Wales** news reported, on at least 2 different occasions, that care homes in North Wales had had PPE taken from them and diverted to hospitals in England. Although Johnson denies this it is almost certainly true. In any case many people did believe the stories which reinforced a belief that Wales would always be subject to England unless it took measures to free itself.

As mentioned above in the section on Brexit the Johnson government has tried to seize control of the distribution of funds from the devolved administration and to bring in the Internal Market Act to undermine the ability of the devolved governments to resist Westminster diktats. The Crime, Sentencing, Police and Courts Bill will be imposed on Wales – not that South Wales Police need much encouragement to break up protests. Furthermore Wales representation at Westminster will be cut from 40 to 32 MPs.

In addition Johnson has instructed all public authorities to fly the Union Jack (known throughout much of the world as the Butcher's Apron) on their buildings. He has understood that a complete ban on flying the Saltire or the Red Dragon would spell disaster for his government but his diktat that they must be flown below the union flag is an unambiguous call for Unionism to be made the dominant legal position in Scotland and Wales. Devolution is to be forever subordinate. As can be imagined this did not go down well in Wales or Scotland.

4) Scottish Independence

The continued growth in support for parties in Scotland advocating independence has also had an impact in Wales. On one level there has been increasing contact and cooperation between Socialist Republican forces in Wales and Scotland. Contact and cooperation is continuing not solely around issues of independence but also around, for example, COP 26 in Glasgow. But on a more general level there is a growing feeling in Wales that if Scotland does break from the United Kingdom then Wales would have to follow suit if it does not want to be merely an appendage of England. This is far from a unique situation. Although the relative sizes of the parties involved are reversed, Wales following Scotland out of the UK is almost as inevitable as Croatia following Slovenia out of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia – though hopefully without the dreadful consequences.

Johnson’s disparaging comments about Scottish devolution on a visit to Scotland and his regret that the Welsh government has powers over lockdown and coronavirus[vii] have also strengthened anti-unionist views. Not surprisingly Tory interference in Welsh decision making has increased support for independence. Or, at the very least, has fundamentally challenged the existing constitutional set-up whereby the United Kingdom is totally dominated by England.

Federal Responses

Mark Drakeford is undoubtedly a unionist. Yet he has begun to question the current arrangements. His speech to the (virtual) Welsh Labour Party Spring Conference called unambiguously for ‘Home Rule’.[viii] Mick Antoniw, a left Labour Member of the Senedd, has written a pamphlet in which he argues for a new federal arrangement in which England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are equal partners.[ix] However, leaving aside the rather important issue of Irish reunification, Antoniw’s proposals are essentially a rehash of Gordon Brown’s Devo-max which was used to undermine the pro-independence vote in Scotland and, as a result, have seen support for independence soar. Antoniw also hopes that Keir Starmer will take up the cause of federalism. Given Starmer’s current inclination to wrap himself in the Union Jack even more than Johnson this is a forlorn hope.

The increase in support for independence in Wales has also led to calls for a separate Welsh Labour Party, again led by Mick Antoniw.[x] Earlier this year saw the formation of Labour For An Independent Wales (L4IW) which has 3 candidates on the Labour slates for the upcoming Senedd elections. Only 1 of them is a constituency candidate, the other 2 are on the regional lists and none of them have much hope of being elected but it is still an important achievement given that the sole supporter of an independent Scotland was removed from the Labour slate for the Scottish Parliament.

The moves within sections of Welsh Labour are inadequate but they clearly reflect a questioning among Labour Party members and supporters of the current constitutional setup in which England is able to totally dominate the other nations. Socialists can work with the advocates of federalism while at the same time criticizing the limits of the proposals and arguing for the need to go beyond federalism and create a Welsh Socialist Republic.

Socialist Republicanism

Outside the Labour Party a number of organisations have developed over the last year in support of a Welsh Socialist Republic: in particular **Undod** (Unity) and **Valleys Underground**. Undod has about 650 members spread throughout Wales. It is in favour of a Welsh Socialist Republic (as is L4IW and Valleys Underground) and is trying to construct an open, democratic organisation in which people from different political traditions and viewpoints can discuss and work together. It has a strong ecosocialist dimension and **Merched Undod** (Undod Women) are ensuring that it also emphasises feminism.

Valleys Underground describe themselves as explicitly Marxist. They originate from the South Wales Valleys, hence the name, but have now built a branch in Wrexham, North Wales. Like Undod and L4IW they argue for a Welsh Socialist Republic and are involved in practical ecosocialist activities such as cleaning up waste ground. There is a certain overlap in membership between Undod, Valleys Underground and, to a lesser extent, L4IW. All 3 organisations participate in YesCymru.

There are 2 important websites giving largely pro-independence views: Voice.Wales (not to be confused with Voice of Wales, a far right site) and Nation.Cymru. Both print articles primarily in English though some of the comments are in Welsh. In addition Undod and Valleys Underground also provide good reporting on events in Wales from a socialist republican

viewpoint.

There has also been a growth in websites dealing with all aspects of Welsh life, including history, natural history, ecological issues and cultural matters – mostly bilingual sites.

And in addition, of course, there is Plaid Cymru which has taken a much more pro-independence position over the last year or so. However, the polls suggest that the growth in support for independence has not necessarily led to an increase in support for Plaid.

Opposition to Independence

However, despite the unprecedented growth in support for independence in Wales there has also been increasing vocal opposition. The Abolish The Assembly Party is standing in the Senedd elections on Thursday 6 May – though the fact the Welsh Assembly became the Senedd Cymru/Welsh Parliament over a year ago doesn't appear to have impinged much on their political awareness. Despite their desire to abolish the 'Assembly' their candidates have indicated they would take up positions as MSs and take the not insignificant salaries. According to the polls Abolish could win between 0 and 7 seats from the regional lists. UKIP, which had 7 AMs at the last election before splitting several times, are unlikely to win more than 1 seat. Their leaflet in support of Neil Hamilton is thoroughly racist, anti-Black Lives Matter, anti-immigrants adnd anti-foreigners. It also calls for the scrapping of the Senedd. Perhaps surprisingly Reform UK, successor to the Brexit Party, is not overtly opposed to devolution and does not call for abolishing the Senedd. But like Abolish and UKIP their leaflets are all only in English.

Guardian columnist Simon Jenkins recently claimed that the biggest handicap to an independent Wales is hostility to 'newcomers'.[xi] He has clearly never read the YesCymru

constitution, adopted in January 2020:

“2. YesCymru is a campaigning organisation with the aim of gaining independence for Wales in order to improve the way the country is governed. YesCymru believes that Wales would be better running its own affairs, as part of a wider European and international family.

YesCymru believes in an inclusive citizenship, which embraces the fact that all who choose to make Wales their home – regardless of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation – are full citizens of the new Wales.”

Certainly the Constitution could be improved to show an understanding of the social model of disability, but otherwise this is not only a constitution socialists can support but one which we can advocate for every area of society. It puts the movement for Welsh independence in the forefront of the fight for civil and human rights for everyone.

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[i] On the rise of Yes Cymru see WalesOnline, 8 Nov 2020.

[ii] See the fascinating interview with Michael Sheen by Owen Jones. Available on You Tube.

[iii] Sky News 16 September 2019

[iv] Irish Times, April 23 2021; South China Morning Post, 29 January 2021

[v] See Gareth Miles and Robert Griffiths; *Socialism For The Welsh People*; 1979. Interestingly Griffiths, current General Secretary of the CPB, calls for a Welsh Socialist Republic at the end of the pamphlet – not something advocated today by the CPB even though support for such a demand is much higher than in 1979.

vi] Nation.Cymru, 29 April 2021

[vii] WalesOnline 23 Mar 2021

[viii] WalesOnline, 26 Feb 2021

[ix] See Constitutional reform is key: Labour needs an agenda for a radical federal UK in LabourList, 14 Jan 2021.

[x] Nation.Cymru, 22 Feb 2021

[xi] Nation.Cymru, 01 May 2021

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