

Greening the Welsh Dragon

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Since the Reagan-Thatcher era, the global economy has been run along neo-liberal lines, a system accepted as orthodox by most of the world's leaders and economists. The principles of deregulation, the free market and continuous economic growth dependent on the consumption of fossil fuels have helped bring about a recession few mainstream politicians had predicted. But a previously unthinkable recession has now happened and the global economic crisis has revealed free market capitalism and the male-dominated corporate world as being profoundly flawed, greedy and unsustainable. Worse still, the UK government has released an unprecedented amount of taxpayers' money to aid a negligent banking system – a degree of funding that successive Conservative and Labour UK governments have historically refused to invest in public services when these have required emergency financial aid.

At the same time climate change is turning into a climate crisis. We are already witnessing melting ice caps, rising sea levels, more natural disasters such as floods, droughts and storms, unreliable and shifting agricultural patterns, the loss of wildlife and species extinction and the destruction of sea life habitats. This is the scale of the environmental mess which we find ourselves in.

DEVOLUTION GAINS

Politics in Wales has been transformed by devolution. This transformation has given people in Wales a confidence in a new progressive civic national identity. This confidence opens up opportunities for us to further deepen our emergent democracy and to change the way we live. We now have a young and vibrant national movement which is not afraid to call itself socialist, unifying, decentralist, internationalist, republican, anti-racist and green. It is a movement which rejects myth-

based and 'kith and kin' nationalism in favour of an outward-looking and inclusive Welsh identity. Its roots are in what the Welsh nationalist and socialist writer Raymond Williams called Wales's history of 'authentically differential radicalism' and 'communalism'.¹ And it is significantly influenced by the more recent tradition of the women's peace and anti-nuclear movements, which were particularly strong in Wales during the 1980s. A late convert to Plaid Cymru, Williams saw the possibilities for the New Left and 'community socialism' in Wales in the 1980s. Having grown up on the border between Wales and England he was fascinated by the notion of 'border'.

Devolution has created the possibility of 'the Left speaking in its own voice'.² The challenge for us now is to turn that voice into action on both a local and a global level to find practical solutions to the effects of these crises.

Famously described as separated from new Labour in Westminster by 'clear red water', the centre of gravity of Welsh politics has been firmly and consistently to the left of UK politics over the last ten years. Despite the severe limitations on powers (Wales has only a fraction of the powers enjoyed by the Scottish Parliament), devolution has enabled the National Assembly for Wales to follow an alternative political path to the one followed by Blair and Brown's new Labour. Since May 2007, a Labour/Plaid Cymru coalition government has been implementing an explicitly green-left programme of government entitled *One Wales*, which is committed to abolishing the internal market in the health service as well as reducing the country's carbon emissions by 3 per cent per year.³ The programme includes an ambitious social housing plan and strategies to promote use of the Welsh language. Section 79 of the Government of Wales Act 2006 places an obligation on Welsh Ministers to promote sustainable development, and *One Wales* commits the Assembly to targets for low carbon buildings, support for indigenous woodlands, a vast expansion of renewable energy and local food production, a green jobs strategy that includes business support for the development of green technologies, and an expansion of home insulation schemes.

OBSTACLES TO PROGRESSION

There is a growing will for Wales to play its part in overcoming the global climate crisis, but our task is not an easy one. Our history as an 'extractive economy' produced a rail system which led out – to London and the ports. It was built and then dismantled 'to empty the nation of

its wealth for the benefits of another'.⁴ This extractive economy is responsible for Wales's past and present reliance on heavy industry, which now means that carbon emissions per person in Wales are the highest in the UK and the thirteenth highest in the world.⁵ We could slash our emissions overnight by closing a coal-fired power station or a steel works, but we don't have the powers; we need what they produce; and we can't afford to lose the jobs. Wales is plugged in to both a UK and a world economy, and the Assembly has no powers for energy generation consents larger than 50 mega watts, which means it has no jurisdiction over our country's greatest carbon emitters, and no ability to benefit from large-scale renewable energy projects. Our limited powers also mean that the Assembly had no say over the granting of planning permission for a new LNG power station in Pembrokeshire, which was given the go-ahead by Westminster with no requirement to make use of the heat it will generate through a CHP project. It also means that the Assembly will not have a say on whether a new nuclear power station is imposed on us, despite a plan for Wales to become self-sufficient in renewable energy and a strong anti-nuclear contingent, particularly amongst the women members of the Welsh cabinet.

Our relatively poor economic position, specifically since Thatcher destroyed the coal industry, has meant that many of the people who describe themselves as socialists in Wales (not just people in the Labour Party, but in Plaid Cymru, the trades unions and the far left) have been prepared to accept jobs at any cost. We need to challenge this mindset with the kind of philosophy that Raymond Williams pioneered in his critique of the left's belief that growth at any cost was the way to raise working-class living standards: 'Since 1945 under North American influence, the majority position amongst socialists has been that the answer to poverty, the sufficient and only answer, is to increase production, and though it has transformed and in general improved our conditions, it has not abolished poverty, and has even created new kinds of poverty.'⁶ His critique was damning: a socialism built on economic growth would actually serve to increase inequalities not reduce them. 'There's no way that growth is going to produce the satisfaction of people's needs. Simply put, some are made affluent by it while others are made poor'.⁷

DECENTRALIST SOCIALISM

Plaid Cymru's constitutional aim is 'to ensure the economic prosperity, social justice and the health of the natural environment based on

decentralist socialism'. Laura McAllister in her book *Plaid Cymru – The Emergence of a Political Party* describes Raymond Williams as one of the thinkers who have particularly influenced Plaid Cymru's commitment to this centrality of decentralisation to our politics. Williams understood that the centralism of the British state was a fundamental obstacle to the radical project: 'The argument that the nation state of Britain is too large derives from the given unevenness of development and the diversity of the areas within. These conditions make it impossible to have policymaking in a general sense dominated by a single centre.'⁸

Wales provides a perfect example of such 'unevenness of development'. Two thirds of our country qualifies for European structural funds because GDP is below 75 per cent; GDP in Ynys Môn (known in English as the Isle of Anglesey) runs at half the UK average; and the number of children in Wales who live in poverty is also above the UK average.

D.J. Davies was an ex-miner who was heavily influenced by syndicalist ideas in the Rhondda and the workers co-operative movement in Denmark, where he lived for a time. In 1944 he argued against coal nationalisation, saying that working for the state was as bad as working for a capitalist. Davies favoured mines being run as co-operatives. Cited by Laura McAllister as a key influence on Plaid's model of decentralist socialism, D.J. Davies argued for 'national self-sustainability', which would produce 'its own requirements to the maximum degree compatible with the welfare of the people'.⁹ Drawing on the ideas of Robert Owen – the 'father of co-operation' – Davies argued for 'well-organised co-operative societies', to distribute goods within the country, and to organise international trade.¹⁰ Their activities would be based on the 'economics of indispensability' and not upon the 'economics of scarcity', which results in concentrations of poverty and wealth. Davies believed that not only would self-sufficient nations enjoy greater internal prosperity and stability; they would also greatly enhance prospects for world peace, 'for peace is far more likely to be ensured by a system under which everyone cultivates their own garden' than by the present system, under which all are competing to mark out spheres of economic influence 'in their neighbours' gardens'.¹¹

The ideas of D.J. Davies and Raymond Williams, together with theories drawn from guild socialism and syndicalism, led Plaid Cymru in 1981 to publish a pamphlet committing the party to decentralist socialism, and this has proved a lasting influence on the party.¹² The report stated that:

the centralist approach is a primitive form of socialism, reflecting the imperialist traditions of the countries where it is practised ... The basic concept of decentralist socialism is that whilst the interests of individuals and of society at large may easily become divergent, it is important to try to harmonise them ... Such harmonisation of individual and society interests can only be achieved in organic communities.

It goes on: 'The excesses of individual greed and exploitation can be countered far more successfully in a decentralised society than in an over-centralised bureaucracy'. It talks of encouraging 'self-help on the part of local and national communities and co-operation at the international level', and emphasises the need to 'safeguard the life of local communities in terms of work, social provision, language and culture'. The nation is 'a community of communities', and the aim should be to establish a state strong enough to exercise political and economic control over basic Welsh interests, whilst devolving operational, executive and administrative powers to ensure the most desirable level of democratic accountability.

PLAID CYMRU AND THE GREENS

In 1989, in an article in the Plaid Cymru newspaper *Welsh Nation*, Cynog Dafis wrote of the necessity to decentralise production and increase local and regional self-sufficiency, in order to avoid world-wide environmental catastrophe.¹³ He argued for close co-operation with the European Green movement to bring about change on an international level. Cynog was elected to the London Parliament in 1992 on a joint Plaid Cymru/Green ticket. That joint platform brought together two distinct groups of people who had previously been polarised – environmentalists forming alternative communities in rural Wales, drawn largely, but not exclusively, from English middle-class intellectuals, and those largely Welsh-speaking communities who had real concerns for the protection of a distinctive cultural and linguistic identity.

This electoral alliance was, in some ways, the obvious and natural outcome of years of collaboration between Plaid and the Green Party in parts of Wales. Both parties believed that free-market capitalism based on unfettered economic growth was destructive, not only to the environment but also to local identities and to the identity of Wales. The Ceredigion experience also helped to cement a more lasting collab-

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oration with the Greens on a European level, with Plaid Cymru MEP Jill Evans sitting in a rainbow group of decentralist, regionalist and Green parties.

However, the electoral pact between Plaid Cymru and the England, Wales and Northern Ireland Green Party ended in 1995 with much recrimination; and some members resigned from the Welsh Green Party in protest. Cynog Dafis admitted that the pact ended with 'with great sadness' on his part, as a result of sabotage through the 'destructive energies of an unrepresentative minority'; but he continues to believe that there remain strong commonalities in Plaid's philosophy of decentralist socialism and the Green's environmentalism.¹⁴ He argues for further mutual understanding between the two parties, in order to build 'a nation in Wales from all the diverse elements within its boundaries'.

The Green Party outside Wales has made some encouraging electoral breakthroughs, which most in Plaid would celebrate: two Green Party MEPs and two Assembly Members in London, two MSPs in the Scottish Parliament and a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, as well as significant gains at local government level, where they have more than one hundred councillors. But the Green Party in Wales has enjoyed nothing like this level of success, despite its unique spread of local and community based environmental living projects across the country. The squandering of the advantages of an electoral pact have cost the Greens dearly, while Plaid's commitment to environmentalism as a defining feature of its politics has seen many who might have voted Green voting for Plaid.

A WELSH GREEN LEFT

Although much co-operation is taking place at an Assembly level, especially since the formation of the *One Wales* coalition between Plaid Cymru and Labour, a green alternative to capitalism can only be a success if it comes from the bottom up. Raymond Williams was convinced that it was this political practice that determined radical outcomes free of the distortions of a monolithic statist socialism: 'The real problem with traditional politics is that where alliances have existed they have been leadership alliances and thus of very limited usefulness. It's basically no good if the leadership engages in alliance-building; if alliances are to happen they will come from people rejecting leadership and building a popular base'.¹⁵

The fundamentals of life are our natural resources – food, water, energy – and we have the conditions and possibilities in Wales to become self-sufficient in all of these. There are plenty of examples of people coming together in communities to produce small-scale renewable energy, organise credit unions, food and housing co-operatives, LETS and shared transport schemes. The Transition Towns movement is proving popular. Seven towns in Wales have acquired that status, which places them in a worldwide network of towns aiming to make the transition to sustainability.¹⁶ A further fifty towns in Wales are in the process of acquiring that status. Links have been developed with the permaculture urban food movement in Cuba, where benefits such as job creation, healthy eating, education, exercise and a reconnection between people and the land can clearly be seen.

In recent times, alliances of the left have been on the basis of people uniting *against* something – against the ‘war on terror’, against privatisation, against unemployment. Raymond Williams described this kind of politics as ‘an alliance of negatives’; it needs to be replaced with a radical politics, founded on the development of a truly popular programme, with mass support from below.

In the 1997 Devolution Referendum, Wales saw just such a positive alliance, the *Yes for Wales* campaign. That alliance proved crucial. In 1979 the referendum vote had been overwhelmingly against devolution, but this time the vote was narrowly won. A Yes campaign will be needed to be built again when the coalition government holds the promised referendum on whether the Assembly should have primary law-making powers, which would turn it into a Parliament.

A decentralist green socialist Wales, building on the history of community co-operation and the history of collaborations between the green, left and national movements in Wales, could provide an attractive way of living post credit-crunch. It would also ensure a Wales capable of making its contribution to a world attempt to counter the climate crisis.

THE POLITICS OF WELSH CHOICE

Raymond Williams understood community and its possibilities in terms of the extending obligations of neighbourhood:

very much attached to place, moving on through the sense of a community under stress, under attack, through conflict, finding its

community and its collective institutions and attempting to move on from that to a political movement which should be the establishment of higher relations of this kind and which should be the total relations of a society: that association, for all its difficulties has been a most significant part of the history of Wales.¹⁷

In our history, people in Wales have always found a way through difficult times by drawing on the strengths of our communities and then moving on to create a new politics. We will need such qualities as the recession deepens. Plaid Cymru thinker and socialist historian Gwyn Alf Williams described these political qualities in terms of the Welsh making choices: ‘The Welsh as a people have lived by making and remaking themselves in generation after generation, usually against the odds, usually within a British context. Wales is an artefact which the Welsh produce. If they want to. It requires an act of choice.’¹⁸

Contrary to the stereotype cherished not only by the Westminster class but the British left too, Welsh nationalism is built on a positive agenda. Our break-up of Britain will be founded on a radical decentralisation of power and a fundamental commitment to environmentalism. Gwyn Alf Williams’s ‘act of choice’ will require a combination of constitutional and social change, a duality that defines our nationalism as a resolutely radical project.

NOTES

1. Raymond Williams, *Wales and England: The National Question Again*, Gomer, Llandysul, 1985, p30.
2. Raymond Williams, *The Practice of Possibility*, 1987 (cited in *Resources of Hope*, Verso, London 1989, p317).
3. <http://wales.gov.uk/strategy/strategies/onewales/onewalese.pdf;jsessionid=C8jtJMPNFfLLb6TQWJdLGnh9m662078WZnNyXglJwF2hg1ZjQThy!-1181725583?lang=en>.
4. George Monbiot, *Dr Beeching turned the country I have come to love into an outpost of empire*, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/dec/30/comment-and-debate.
5. www.walesonline.co.uk/news/welsh-politics/welsh-politics-news/2009/02/09/heavy-industry-contributes-to-wales-carbon-footprint-91466-22884449/.
6. I.P. Cooke, *Decentralism and the Politics of Place: an interview with Raymond Williams*, 1984 (cited in *Resources of Hope*, pp238-239).
7. Cooke, *Decentralism and the Politics of Place*, p243.

8. Cooke, *Decentralism and the Politics of Place*, pp238-239.
9. D.J. Davies, *Towards Welsh Freedom*, Plaid Cymru, Cardiff 1958, p71 (cited in Laura McAllister, *Plaid Cymru – The Emergence of a Political Party*, Seren, Bridgend 2001, p72).
10. Richard Bickle & Molly Scott Cato, *New Views of Society: Robert Owen for the 21st Century*, Scottish Left Review Press, Glasgow 2008, p1.
11. D.J. Davies, *Towards Welsh Freedom*, p72; Laura McAllister, *Plaid Cymru – The Emergence of a Political Party*, p37.
12. Eurfyl ap Gwilym, Emrys Roberts, Owen John Thomas, Dafydd Wigley and Phil Williams, *Report of the Plaid Cymru Commission of Inquiry*, 1981, pp14-16.
13. Cynog Dafis, *Welsh Nation*, Nov/Dec 1989.
14. Cynog Dafis, 19th Annual lecture of the Welsh Political Archive, National Library of Wales, delivered at Y Drwm, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, 4 November 2005 (translated text).
15. Cooke, *Decentralism and the Politics of Place*, p239-240.
16. The seven transition towns are Llandeilo, Presteigne, Lampeter, Machynlleth, Rhayader, Chepstow, Monmouth.
17. Raymond Williams, *The Importance of Community*, in *Resources of Hope*, p115.
18. Gwyn Alf Williams, *When Was Wales?*, Penguin Books, London 1991, p304.

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