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The Welsh Conservative Party and the National Assembly of Wales

1997 – 2010

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Abstract

The Conservative Party in Wales has undergone a great deal of change since the creation of the National Assembly in 1999. As a party that vociferously opposed the passing of any devolution settlement,¹ the 'Yes' outcome of the devolution referendum would push the party into a crisis of relevancy. How exactly does a conservative deal such changes in the structure of a political system? What are the environmental push-pull factors and themes that emanate from such a change?² This dissertation seeks to explore such questions and also communicates the experiences of the Welsh Conservative party in the age of devolution.

The structure of this dissertation is chronological in nature.³ It begins with the experiences of the Conservatives in the first assembly onwards to the present at the time of writing (2010). A myriad of materials will be utilised from the works of Conservative philosophers, specialists in devolution specifically of the Welsh form⁴, works on Welsh history and journalistic articles.

¹ John Major, *You can only be sure with the Conservatives*, Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto, 1997, P. 1

² These themes include party leadership, the relationship between the Welsh and National party and the philosophy of conservatism as applied to institutional change amongst others.

⁴ Especially through the findings of the devolution monitoring reports.

The word length of this dissertation is 14,414 words, including footnotes.

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

Signed..... (Candidate)

Date.....

STATEMENT 1

This work is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated.

Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed..... (Candidate)

Date.....

“The Government are unwilling to rule out the possibility of future transfers of ministerial functions to the assembly. At the moment, the Government have no plans to make further orders. I have repeatedly stressed that devolution is a process, not an event.”⁵

Defining devolution as a process and not an event is quite likely to be the most famous and widely-quoted comment on devolution in the United Kingdom. Whilst the statement and the immediate thoughts of it are brought towards the process of the devolution of a political system, it is also important to note that a different form of devolution is occurring outside of the structures of government. The political parties those organisations that compete for the power to control the machine of government had to adjust themselves in order to grasp a modified and restructured political machine. Thus a process of devolution for the political parties of the United Kingdom that competed in those newly-devolved polities would begin in tandem with the devolution of the political structures of the British state.

The Conservative and previously, Tory party in Wales has historically been the recipient of unpopular sentiment and scorn amongst the majority of the people of Wales since the mid-nineteenth century⁶. Ever since the expansion of the electoral franchise, and the creation of a Welsh arm in 1921⁷, the party has consistently failed

⁵ Ron Davies MP, *Commons Hansard*, 21st January 1998: Column 1108

⁶ John Davies, *A History of Wales*, Revised edition, 2007 p. 370

⁷ Beti Jones, *Welsh Elections 1885 – 1997*, Lolfa, 1998

to capture the support of the majority of people in the region.⁸ This unpopularity existed for a number of reasons. Firstly, the party was traditionally supportive of the landed class of people⁹, a great proportion of which in Wales were either of English descent or the descendants of ancient Norman Lords.¹⁰ Secondly, the party was associated with the Anglican church of England, a church with its traditions of theological conformism that ran counter to the traditionally nonconformist Baptist and Methodist communities of Wales.¹¹ Thirdly, the proportion and relative popularity in anglicised and thus the English-speaking regions of Wales further alienated the party from the majority of Welsh people outside of those regions¹². In all accounts the party was perceived as an alien force (and some argue a force of English imperialism)¹³ which threatened the very existence of Wales as an idea and the Welsh culture and language that enforced a sense of identity different to that of England. Before the formation of the Labour Party, the Liberal Party garnered the great mass of electoral support in Wales¹⁴. After the formation of the Labour Party in 1900, this dominant position was taken up by that party. The popularity of classical liberalism and later socialism in Wales has indicated that historically the electorate of Wales has rejected the Conservative party and before that the Tory Party at a consistently substantial level.¹⁵

⁸ David Melding, *Have We Been Anti-Welsh? The Conservative Party and the Welsh Nation*, 2005

⁹ John Davies, *A History of Wales*, Revised edition, 2007 p. 377

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 422

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Adam Price MP, *Wales: The First and Final Colony*, Lecture to the Institute of Welsh Politics, Aberystwyth University, 16th November 2009

¹⁴ John Davies, *A History of Wales*, Revised edition, 2007 p.286

¹⁵ Wyn Jones, Scully & Trystan, *Why do the Conservatives do (even) worse in Wales?*, British Parties and Elections Review, 2002

As the Conservative and Unionist Party, one of the fundamental tenets of the parties' ideology was a strict adherence to British Unionism which continues to this day with party leader David Cameron claiming that the party will "*do everything and anything to keep our two countries as one.*"¹⁶ Localisation and regionalism in the Kingdom were thus strongly opposed as catalysts of disunity. In contrast, policies that would help cement and bind the cultural divisions of the people of the Isle of Britain were supported. Thus, Welsh culture, the language and the self-determination of a Welsh nation were also to be strictly opposed and were historically expressed through educational reform and recommendations that advanced Anglicisation¹⁷. A loathing of the party amongst those interested in preserving and maintaining Welsh culture and identity would understandably develop. In terms of academia this lack of success in Wales has also afforded the party far less interest from academics in comparison to the more successful Labour and Liberal parties and the interesting regional intricacies and dynamics of Plaid Cymru. Therefore this work is an exercise in bringing a greater degree of insight into the Conservative Party in Wales and its members during devolution through the assembling of the information of that experience together in one singular work.

With the onset of devolution and the creation of the National Assembly of Wales, the party would face new challenges within a territory ever more hostile to it. The

¹⁶ Graeme Wilson, 'Tories Head to Scotland to Defend Union', *The Daily Telegraph*, 16th January 2007 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1539649/Tories-head-to-Scotland-to-defend-Union.html>

¹⁷ Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales, *Reports of the Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales*, 1848

nature of this dissertation will uncover the history of the Conservative Party in Wales during devolution. This exploration will be assessed through a chronological manner from the onset of devolution in 1997 up to the twilight of the third Assembly in 2010. The study of the Conservatives time in the Assembly will be portioned into singular chapters for the first, second and third Assemblies. Also, a fourth chapter will act as a concluding portion and touch upon the challenges facing the Conservative Party in Wales in the future.

In this examination of the history of the Conservative Party during Devolution, there will be a number of running themes. Firstly the relationship between the central party in London and the power dynamic between the two will become clear through the work. Secondly, the role of individuals and their own influences upon the experiences of the Conservative Party in the Assembly will be assessed throughout and thirdly the structures of the Conservative Party in Wales and the development of a truly devolved and necessarily independent Welsh Conservative Party over the course of the devolution process. Whilst explaining the pressures and challenges faced by the party during devolution, the work will also argue that devolution of the party itself was necessary for it to maintain relevancy within the new political dynamics of Welsh politics.

Chapter 1

1999: A New Beginning: The Conservatives in the First Assembly

The devolution referendum of 1997 proved to be one of the closest ever undertaken. The slight margin of 0.6%¹⁸ or, in terms of individuals 6721¹⁹, represented a majority in favour that was slightly higher than the population of Tenby.²⁰ The Conservative Party, long a consistent and extreme opponent of devolution and the principal organisation that campaigned for a 'No' vote was marginally defeated in its efforts. The event in itself changed the shape and form of politics in the United Kingdom and even more in Wales, which would have a political institution that had power beyond the basic tenets of administrative devolution that the Welsh Office in London represented. This is not to say however that the party and its members had limited thoughts and debate on devolution. Whilst it would be preferable and simpler to paint the Conservative Party of the time as heavily-controlled and staunchly old unionist, this simplistic image of it is simply untrue. The first substantial conservative argument against devolution, beyond the generalities of the unionist argument would be brought into the fore by the then party leader William Hague. The question of asymmetric devolution was the main concern of the conservative attack upon Labour's plans for devolution. What this meant was that a devolved Scottish Parliament would receive greater legislative and tax-raising powers than would be enjoyed by an Assembly in Cardiff.

¹⁸ Found at: <http://www.election.demon.co.uk/welsh.html>

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Office for National Statistics, *2001 National Census*, found at http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/access_results.asp

As Hague wrote in the *Western Mail*:

“You are not being offered the same sort of deal that the government gave Scotland: the Cardiff Assembly would merely take over the existing responsibilities of the Welsh Office and have neither law-making nor tax-raising powers.

Why do they want to give the Edinburgh Parliament the powers to legislate, but not the Cardiff Assembly? Why do they trust Scots to decide whether they want tax-raising powers, but not the Welsh? A Welsh Assembly would represent the worst of both worlds. Wales would be deprived of its own influence in the UK without gaining a direct say over its own affairs.”²¹

It should be noted that Hague himself was one of the staunchest opponents of devolution. Indeed the intellectual honesty of the debate may be put into question and the nature of it as merely a means of attacking Labour Party policy for a wider electoral effect. Regardless of the motivations for such a debate, it shows that the conservative party were capable of imagining a devolved United Kingdom within the Labour Party model and discussing and debating such a model before a referendum had been cast.

A major theme for the Conservative Party in Wales during this period would be the angst of remaining politically relevant. To remain a relevant and thus a living political force in Wales the party had to work within the new devolved landscape and seek a way of advancing its goals through it. Whilst this is clear to the researcher in hindsight, it was not particularly clear to members of the party during the period, particularly those of a staunchly unionist persuasion.

²¹ *Western Mail*, 29th January 1997

The Philosophy of Conservatism as Applied to the National Assembly

The formation of the National Assembly of Wales was a major event in terms of changing the structure of the British Political system. How a Conservative deals with such a change is a difficult question. This is especially difficult since devolution was so consistently opposed by the party in terms of both official policy and the views of the great majority of its members and supporters as expressed by the party backing the 'No' campaign. The British conservative philosopher Michael Oakeschott considers the following:

“Changes then have to be suffered, and a man of Conservative temperament (that is, one strongly disposed to preserve his identity) cannot be indifferent to them. In the main, he judges them by the disturbance they entail and, like everyone else, deploys his resources to meet them. The idea of innovation, on the other hand, is improvement. Nevertheless, a man of this temperament will not himself be an ardent innovator, he is not inclined to think that nothing is happening unless great changes are afoot and therefore he is not worried by the absence of innovation.”²²

In the case of devolution, great change was indeed afoot and a great deal of innovation was required on the part of the Conservative party in Wales to maintain its own relevancy and remain at least a somewhat notable political force in Wales. The Welsh arm of the party would thus require strong and visionary leadership that would unite the party in the Assembly and also have the intellectual and political bravery to explore new and alternative forms of political engagement.

²² Michael Oakeschott, 'On Being Conservative', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (new and expanded edn, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis, 1991), pp. 407-37, at pp. 410-11

As we shall find, another key to the future maintenance of the Conservative party in Wales would come from the mind of the Welsh groups intellectual David Melding. Melding would from the very beginning of devolution be prepared to work both with devolution and develop it further. The main element within the Conservative Party that stood against such action would be the desire to maintain the British Union. This desire, to maintain the established order of things in light of great change is consistent with traditional Conservative positions on change.²³ Conservatism is fundamentally a sceptical political philosophy. It is largely concerned with what 'is' rather than what 'ought'²⁴ to be and takes upon itself a posteriori and thus empirical approach when dealing with new ideas and change. Roger Scruton argues that Conservatism isn't merely the automatic desire to conserve the current social order for its own sake:

*"It is a limp definition of conservatism to describe it as the desire to conserve; for although there is in every man and woman some impulse to conserve that which is safe and familiar, it is the nature of this 'familiarity' that needs to be examined. To put it briefly, conservatism arises directly from the sense that one belongs to some continuing, and pre-existing social order, and that this fact is all-important in determining what to do. ... The desire to conserve is compatible with all manner of change, provided only that change is also continuity."*²⁵

This highlights an important disparity between conservatives on the issue of devolution. Those who would view devolution as a first step towards the end of the British union would view it as a natural enemy. Others, as we shall see would view it not as a threat, but as an opportunity to renew the union in the spirit of progressive continuity.

²³ Edmund Burke, *Reflections of the Revolution in France*, 1790

²⁴ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739

²⁵ Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (3rd edn, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2001) pp. 10-11

The Starting Field

Gifted with just nine AM's during the 1999 Welsh Assembly election²⁶, it was clear that this Conservative Party would not enjoy a clear position as either the number-one or two party within the polity as it did in Westminster. Interestingly, eight of the nine AM's were regional candidates elected through the additional member system²⁷. In essence the conservatives benefitted from an electoral system that the party had strongly opposed for decades. Thus policy interests for the Welsh party and those of the central party in Westminster were not congruent on this issue. It would be clear that to survive the Welsh party had to develop new and different strategies than those exercised by the party in Westminster in order for it to survive on the political terrain of the Assembly.

A New Party in Wales and a New Leader

Now that a new polity existed in Wales, to compete within that system a new Welsh arm of the party was required with all of the kinds of organisational structures and hierarchies that the party in Westminster operated. First and foremost the question of who would head that hierarchy and thus the party in Wales would be brought to the fore. Since the party could be roughly delineated between the more extreme unionists and moderates, the two main candidates for leadership would fall into those two categories. The staunchly unionist Rod Richards would become a favourite amongst those that wished to repeal devolution whilst the more moderate Nick Bourne would be favoured by those already seeking to work with

²⁶ Bryn Morgan, *Welsh Assembly Elections: May 1999 Research Paper*, House of Commons Library, p. 6
Found at: <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/rp99/rp99-051.pdf>

²⁷ *Ibid.*

devolution for pragmatic reasons. The leadership contest would be decided by a ballot of Welsh members of the Conservative Party. In this contest Richards would be the victor and became the first leader of the Welsh Conservatives in the Assembly. This outcome indicates the views of Conservative Party membership in Wales during this period. That is that the membership preferred a staunch unionist compared with the moderating influence of Nick Bourne. At this point it is clear that party membership were extremely opposed to the very existence of a devolved assembly. In hindsight one would question the ability of the Conservative Party in Wales to remain relevant in the assembly with the leadership of an ultra-unionist. However, as the influential Italian philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli observed²⁸, *fortuna* is the enemy of political order. The ascendancy of Richards to party leader would be affected by three particular events, all unrelated. The first issue for Richards would be the structure and the manner of his selection to the Assembly. Richards, as a favourite in the party would be selected as both a constituency candidate for Clwyd West and a regional candidate on the party list for North Wales West. Richards would not win the constituency seat but would gain admittance through his position as head of the party list in the region. Thus, the legitimacy of dual-candidacy and Richards' position within the Assembly would be put under strain by this fact. It is argued that dual-candidacy retracts from legitimacy since the electors have explicitly decided to not reward the individual in question with a seat whilst the political party have decided to place him.²⁹ Therefore political power is moved by a degree into the hands of the party hierarchy and not the voters.³⁰ The second event and perhaps the most serious and damaging was the accusation

²⁸ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1532 – This treatise would become the basis for political intrigue from the renaissance onwards until the present day.

²⁹ Lord Ivor Richard *et al.*, *Report of the Richard Commission*, Spring 2004, p. 233

³⁰ *Ibid.*

that Richards committed grievous bodily harm against a young woman³¹. Whilst Richards would be acquitted of such an act³², the event would continue to mar his reputation within Wales and thus his credibility as the leader of the Conservative Party in Wales. The third event would be a political decision on the appointment of David Davies as his successor as party leader in Wales. Whilst the more moderate members of the party could barely stomach a unionist leader, the attempted appointment of David Davies by Richards as his replacement, himself also a staunch unionist led to the party rejecting Richards' choice. The moderates had been gifted with the opportunity of removing a unionist and so they were not prepared to waste the opportunity by receiving another strong unionist as head of the party in Wales. With this rejection as a clear vote of no-confidence, Richards' position as not only the leader of the party but as a member became untenable. Thus Richards would stand down as leader of the party and eventually as a politician in general practice.³³ Whilst this series of events were rather unfortunate for Richards, in hindsight this allowed the moderate wing of the Welsh Conservatives to gain greater influence in terms of policy in Wales. Nick Bourne, the runner-up in the leadership contest would become the new leader of the party³⁴ which would allow for an atmosphere of moderation that would allow the establishment of a stable possibility for working with devolution.

³¹ BBC Wales, *Richards bailed on GBH Charge*, September 8th 1999

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/441456.stm>

³² BBC Wales, *Rod Richards cleared of assault*, June 23rd 2000

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/799298.stm>

³³ BBC Wales, *Welsh Tories await leadership decision*, August 16th 1999

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/429349.stm>

³⁴ BBC Wales, *Bourne snubs Richards in cabinet*, August 25th 1999

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/429349.stm>

London and Cardiff

With a newly-born devolved political institution, the independence and effectiveness of it are put into question. Without the benefit of experience, the actual facts how such a relationship would play out were unknown. At the foundation of the Assembly, the Labour Party under the leadership of Tony Blair enjoyed a sizeable degree of public support in the polls³⁵ whilst the conservatives languished at levels of extreme unpopularity and a seeming lack of direction. With Labour strong in the Westminster Parliament, it would be most logical to assume that the ruling party would exert its influence onto its devolved counterpart with ease. Adding to this desire is the fact that members of the Labour party were the architects of devolution, thus it was in many ways their responsibility to reign in the assembly. Further, the dominance of Labour in Wales potentially gifted Labour in Westminster a realistic prospect of easily controlling policy within Wales. However these facts also lead to a great deal of suspicion as to the independence of the party in Wales and thus the independence of the institution because of the dominant scope of Labour membership. This provided the conservatives in Wales with an early base of criticisms of the state of affairs.

The First Minister

The role of the First Minister is one that is brand new in terms of the British political process. The Welsh secretary is the only historical ministerial position that is at least somewhat analogous to the new position, and even that is notably dissimilar. The existence

³⁵ The results of national political polls, 1997-2001 conducted by various polling agencies found at: <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/historical-polls/voting-intention-1997-2001>

of the role is the closest to a position of an independent head of government or state that Wales has never experienced in the post-Westphalian era³⁶. The first minister thus holds a degree of power within Wales. The main importance of the position however is related to the fact that the First Minister is the most senior member of the Assembly. The position reflects and represents the Assembly in the eyes of the public and provides a personal foundation for relations between the devolved polity and the head of government of the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister. If any individual actor is most representative of the goals, ambitions and style of politics practiced in the Assembly then the First minister is the embodiment of those themes along with the presiding officer.

Following the resignation of the man considered as the 'architect of devolution' and favourite for the position, Ron Davies,³⁷ the first individual to take up this new position would be the Labour Party politician Alun Michael. For the Conservatives this decision would be somewhat favourable for them. The main concern regarding Alun Michael was the role that he played prior to becoming First Minister, as secretary of state for Wales. Whilst Michael was clearly experienced in the realm of politics and the Welsh region, the fact that he held a position traditionally associated with central government dictation towards the region made the appointment somewhat suspicious. The reputation of the Welsh secretary role and its relationship to the Welsh office had led some to label the role as 'London's man in Wales'. Thus the appointment of Michael as First Minister could be attacked as a clear

³⁶ The peace of Westphalia, a term denoting the ratification of peace treaties signed in Osnabrück and Münster in 1648 is widely considered to be the first wide-spread declaration and acceptance of a modern state system based upon the concept of political sovereignty.

³⁷ Patrick Wintour, 'Ron Davies ends political career', *The Guardian*, March 10th 2003
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/429349.stm>

indication of the London party exerting influence and control upon the newly-devolved Welsh arm of the Labour Party.

For the Conservatives, fortune would favour them through the actions of this Labour administration. In the very first short debate held in the Assembly on June 8th 1999, just before the onset of the 1999 European Parliament elections the debate was to be concerned with Wales' role in Europe due to the chronological relevancy of the date. In a display of political unprofessionalism, the Labour member for the Torfaen constituency Lynne Neagle would use the opportunity as a pedestal for launching a strong attack upon the European policies of both Plaid Cymru and the Conservative Party. Neagle would refuse to give way to other members during the proceedings leading to the Plaid Cymru leader, Dafydd Wigley to request to the presiding officer that the assembly could move, as in true Westminster practice to officially bar her from being heard. The first minister would reply that such a motion was not possible and thus lead to both the Plaid Cymru and Conservative groups leaving the assembly.³⁸ This outcome, at the very first Assembly short debate would embarrass the Labour Party and by extension the first minister Alun Michael. Further then seeming unity of Conservative and Plaid Cymru members over this matter was something which showed that traditional partisanship and the rules of the political game in the assembly would clearly differ to those ingrained into the Westminster institution. Further a walk-out in the very first meeting of the assembly put questions upon the structure of the system and the institution as a whole. These problems would continue with the agriculture

³⁸ The confusion of practice between the old political culture of the Westminster Parliament and the new constitution and procedures of the Assembly would prove to be a problem for the efficient development of debates and the policy process in the Assembly. Concurrent with the various confusions over the new procedures, the exact powers of the Assembly would remain somewhat of a mystery for members until a system of Legislative Competency Orders was developed.

secretary facing a motion of censure and later the Conservatives would put forward a motion of no-confidence in the first minister because Michael failed to act upon the original motion of censure. The eventual resignation of Michael over the issue of Objective One funding sent a clear signal to the London branch of the Labour Party. As Morgan and Mungham noted:

“The rejection of Alun Michael imparts a very clear signal to Millbank and Downing Street, namely that a new kind of politics is beginning to emerge in Wales, a politics no longer receptive to a command and control system in which the role of Welsh Labour is to implement decisions taken at head office. Inside the party initiative and authority are passing, slowly but surely, from unelected party officials to the elected Labour Group in the Assembly. Throughout Wales, not least in the once ultra-loyalist valleys, traditional Labour voters will continue to experiment at the ballot box if their unpretentious hopes and aspirations go unheeded. What the advent of Rhodri Morgan as First Secretary signals above all, perhaps, is the birth of the Assembly as a self-consciously Welsh institution as distinct from a branch office of a prestigious London address, be it Westminster or Whitehall, Millbank or Downing Street.”³⁹

Whilst this drama was expressed within the controlling Labour Party, this event would also serve as a lesson to the other parties, particularly the Conservatives. The Alun Michael affair showcased a debate between the parties that fell out of the control of the Westminster headquarters. Nick Bourne emerged as a clear leader in terms of criticism of Michael which

³⁹ Morgan & Mungham, *Redesigning Democracy: The Making of the Welsh Assembly*, 2000

was important as an indicator of an early step towards developing an independent Conservative Party in Wales⁴⁰.

Towards the end of 2000 it became clear that the party in Wales was stable due to the leadership of Bourne. The Labour-led Assembly however was not a model of such stability. Whilst Rhodri Morgan would prove to be a more effective and popular candidate than Alun Michael, the need to change the status of the Assembly leadership became apparent. Labour only managed to win twenty-eight out of sixty seats in the Assembly. Whilst the party maintained the largest representation, this number was short of an overall majority. Thus, Labour policies in the Assembly encountered difficulties with opposition from the Conservatives, Plaid Cymru or the Liberal Democrats or a mixture of the three. In October of 2000 the first coalition was announced between the Labour administration and the Liberal Democrats. With the increasing failures of the corporate system, the Assembly began to take on language, if not structure similar to that used in Westminster. The new leader of Plaid Cymru, Ieuan Wyn Jones received the title 'leader of the opposition'. This new state of affairs would prove to be comfortable for the Welsh Conservative Party as it brought the Assembly marginally closer in form to the familiar Westminster Parliament. As Glyn Davies, the Conservative member for Mid and West Wales noted during a short debate:

"...There will be little impact on the Conservative group. We have always viewed it as our job to test the government, their proposals and to see what individual ministers are made of.

⁴⁰ Developing the party in Wales as a viable and independent arm of the Conservative Party is one goal however the task of also extending the recognisability of the members within the Welsh public mind-set would also be vital for the people to identify with these, at this time, practically unknown individuals.

*We will carry on doing that. We will fit into these new arrangements as if they were made to measure for us.*⁴¹

Unfolding before the experience of the Assembly during this period, was a sense that the old ways of Parliament which were so firmly rejected by the original design of the Assembly did not deserve the complete derisive treatment that they had garnered. Interestingly this more traditional formation of political partisanship was borne out of the non-traditional form of a coalition in government. Whilst political coalitions had existed historically in the United Kingdom, particularly during the early half of the twentieth century, the concept had become alien to British political culture after the Second World War with the rising duopoly of the Labour and Conservative Parties. This new acceptance of coalitions also increases the chances of the Conservative Party on gaining some modicum of power within the Assembly due to the acceptable policy of pooling membership in order to gain control. This cultural change thus created the somewhat realistic possibility of the Conservative Party holding power in Wales in the form of a coalition with another.

The year 2001 would prove to be an interesting year for the Conservative Party in Wales, mainly because of the United Kingdom General Election of that year. In the brief history of the Assembly, such an election had not occurred and so the results and events leading up to the election would indicate the advancement of the party in both Wales and London.

Further the relationship between the Welsh arm and the central party in London could be assessed through the policies and campaigning of the party during the election. The Conservative Party, under the leadership of William Hague failed to make any advancement in Wales with the repeated failure of not gaining a single parliamentary seat in Wales.

⁴¹ *Assembly Record*, 19th October, 2000

Whilst that sobering fact may have indicated and confirmed the death of the Conservative Party in Wales, the statistical results of the Conservative performance in Wales were not particularly damning. The Conservatives received 21% of the electoral vote in Wales. Whilst as noted this number failed to garner the reward of a single seat, the number is typical of Conservative results in Wales which have traditionally been located within the 20% - 30% range. The election itself in terms of results would indicate the continuance of the Status Quo with seat numbers for all parties unchanged in Wales. This would communicate the continued dominance of the Labour Party in Wales in terms of parliamentary representation. However, whilst the results maintained a representative status quo, all of the parties, apart from Plaid Cymru received a drop in vote numbers. This drop is consistent with an overall drop in turnout for the 2001 election as compared to the previous election in 1997. However, quite a sizeable drop was seen in Labour Party vote numbers with what could be explained as an apparent shift to Plaid Cymru. This indicates that devolution was supporting the acceptance of Plaid Cymru as a mainstream political party in Wales. For the Conservatives this outcome could provide new hope as it indicated a weakening of the Labour party in Wales and a general split between the nationalist and unionist elements of the political left in the polity. For the Conservative Party this would indicate an opportunity to capitalise upon this perceived weakening effect within Wales. However, a further indication of the status-quo remaining was the relative performance of the Conservatives within the ancient strongholds of the Conservative Party in Wales. Amongst the strongest performances were in the constituencies of Brecon and Radnor, Preseli Pembrokeshire and Clwyd West. With concern, all of the mentioned constituencies fell into the geographical

and demographic homelands of 'British Wales' as noted by the three-wales-model⁴². This indicates that there had been little advancement in terms of appealing to voters outside of those areas of Wales. Above all the performance can be perceived as a stable defence of the Conservative position in Wales, albeit that position being somewhat weak during that period. The Conservatives maintained their relevancy within Welsh politics and the debate and they did not retreat into absolute obscurity in Wales. These events would spur individuals within the party to attempt to create a stronger Welsh identity for the party, so as to mitigate the clearly still-held perceptions of the conservatives as an 'English party'. Within a few days of the election, the Conservative AM for Mid and West Wales claimed:

*"Our attitude towards the National Assembly is the key to convincing the Welsh people that we are totally committed to 'sticking up for Wales'. Whether we like it or not, the National Assembly is here to stay and the Conservative Party's commitment to it is the measure by which our commitment to Wales will be judged ... Our strategy for Wales may include a Welsh political leader and may involve more autonomy for the Welsh Conservative Party, but at the heart of any strategy must lie a 100 per cent commitment to an effective Assembly."*⁴³

These words would echo a clear desire for the Welsh arm of the Party to in essence, devolve itself and to shake its old image away, as it was clearly being perceived within a negative light from the electors of Wales. The cautious words of Davies, the usage of the 'may' instead of the 'will' indicate a clear concern for the choice of words and of dealing with the London branch of the party. Such sentiments of devolving party autonomy would be difficult

⁴² Osmond, John (2002). "Welsh Civil Identity in the Twenty-First Century". in David C. Harvey, Rhys Jones, Neil McInroy and Christine Milligan (eds.). *Celtic Geographies: Old culture, new times*. London: Routledge. pp. 80–82.

⁴³ Glyn Davies, 'Time to play as a team for the party's sake'. *Western Mail*, 11th June 2001

for many in the party to readily accept, especially those outside of the Welsh arm.

Opposition to the devolution of the United Kingdom was mirrored in the opposition to devolving the party itself. A strong unionist party is logically also strongly united in its own structure. Acceptance of devolving party structures would also lead to the clear indication that the party accepted Wales as a different polity which required a degree of autonomy so as to apply specialisms to the region.

The effects of the election would continue to provide discussion for the Conservative party in the Assembly. David Melding AM, a notable figure in the intellectual development of the party began to voice his views in the Assembly. This statement would prove to be somewhat more extreme and less ambiguous compared to the earlier statement by Davies:

“The party least sympathetic to evolution needs to become its most conspicuous supporter. I believe that we have reached the stage where the British state can only survive with devolution. Commentators should not rule out, therefore, the possibility that the next and most vital advance for devolution in Wales will be instigated by the Conservative Party. It has always been my view that Britain could survive either as a unitary or a quasi-federal state. But the present model of devolution in Wales – essentially shadowing the work of the Welsh Office as was – is derivative and categorically different from the legislatures established in Scotland and Northern Ireland. We inhabit the constitutional grey zone of executive devolution with powers to determine secondary legislation. As the constitutional expert Professor Vernon Bogdanor has observed – as a clear and distinct entity, secondary legislation simply does not exist. The scope for the secondary legislative powers is

determined by each individual Act of Parliament. Such conferred powers can range from next to nothing to nearly everything. It depends on the particular piece of primary legislation.”⁴⁴

The previous declaration is likely to be the first notable public communication of a new brand of Conservative thinking in Wales. Instead of either continuing to oppose devolution, in the vein of Rod Richards, or merely grudgingly accepting the new status-quo, melding argued for the Conservative Party to actively support devolution, and lead the process not simply to remain relevant but to maintain the British union. Thus a fresh approach to unionism was communicated by this speech and one which would indicate the direction of the Welsh party in thought for future years.

The failure of the Conservatives to advance in Wales, combined with their first two years of experience in the Assembly brought together further debate and outpourings of statements regarding party structure. During this period towards the twilight of the First Assembly, the question of party structure appeared to take a significant hold upon the internal debates of the party. This would continue onwards into 2002 with ever clearer assessments of what ought to be done in terms of party structure and policies. Further the weight of the debate within the party began to affect the positions of Welsh Conservative politicians outside of the Welsh Assembly. Jonathan Evans MEP and former MP for Brecon and Radnor demanded a degree of greater deal of autonomy for the party in Wales:

“... further organisational changes will be required if we are to meet the challenge of making the Conservatives the leading force in Welsh politics. Central to this project must be the organisation of the way the Party is run from within Wales. Ron Davies has rightly pointed

⁴⁴ David Melding, *Conservatives Should Finish the Job*, Agenda IWA, Autumn 2001

out the contradiction of Labour facilitating the transfer of powers from Westminster to Cardiff and then not exercising parallel decision-making in respect of its own party organisation.

Conservative Central Office in London appears to have adopted a somewhat ambivalent approach towards autonomy in the party structure in Wales and the English regions. For many years the party organisation was run on a regional basis with strong regional structures. I believe that we are now at the time when Central Office staff in Wales must come fully under the control and remit of the Welsh Conservative Party.”⁴⁵

This statement is even more significant than the previous ones concerning a greater deal of internal devolution within the party since the individual making the statement was not an Assembly member. Firstly this is indicative that the acceptance of the Assembly and its effect upon the people of Wales by politicians outside of the institution. Further the declaration recognises that the Assembly required greater interest on the behalf of the Conservative Party. As noted previously, the Conservative Party had traditionally been viewed by the people as Wales as an ‘English’ party. In order for the party in Wales to be successful, it had to firstly devolve policy-making but also to indicate that the party in Wales was a truly Welsh-based party that recognised the interests of the Welsh polity.

The coming 2003 Welsh Assembly election and the party conferences before it would express varying concerns amongst the members of the party as to the hopes for the election. As noted, the accepted culture of coalition government within the devolved

⁴⁵ Jonathan Evans, *The Future of Welsh Conservatism*, IWA Gregynog Papers, May 2002

institution would allow the Conservatives, even as a third party in terms of results to realistically hope to achieve power through it. Whilst the leader of the party in Wales would deny any possibility of forming a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, the head of the parties policy coordination in Wales, David Melding AM stated:

“As we become more successful in opposition in Wales, the electorate will expect us to think more and more about joining a government as a coalition partner.”⁴⁶

This would be an insightful observation on the part of Melding and the first time an official statement would be released in terms of the consideration of forming a coalition by the party. The extra dimension of political strategy and thus complexity of required operations within the Assembly would be another argument for greater independence for the Conservatives in Wales. Another issue that the Conservatives would again have to contend with was the nature of the electoral system. The first Assembly election of 1999 had proven that the Conservatives had little hope for gaining seats through the first-past-the-post system in Wales. The additional member system had been the saviour of the party in Wales in terms of the successful election of Conservative Party members to the Welsh Assembly. Thus member selection within the list would be another factor to consider for the party. Differently to the other parties, particularly Labour and Plaid Cymru, favoured candidates would preferably be placed at the top of regional party lists rather than as candidates in FPTP constituencies due to the greater likelihood of them being elected.

⁴⁶ Western Mail, 8th October 2002

The relationship between the Welsh Conservatives and the party in London would once again be tested. Traditional animosities towards devolution, especially from the London arm of the party would be brought out into the open in the period immediately before the 2003 Welsh Assembly election. Welsh party leader Nick Bourne would state:

“I am absolutely fed up with the way certain individuals are acting ... it is quite clear they don't have elections this year and all this will do is detract from the fact that here in Wales I lead the most united and progressive group in the National Assembly. It is time the sniping in the party stopped. We need a bit of team work – at the moment it's like eight people in a rowing boat with four people rowing in one direction and four rowing in another.”⁴⁷

A clear disconnect between the goals and aspirations of the party in Wales and that in London existed. Whilst the party in the Assembly had managed to oust the staunch unionist elements from control with the departure of Rod Richards, the party in London clearly had not accepted the approach applied by moderates such as Bourne and Melding. The statement also indicates that the central party valued Assembly elections far less than the General Election. Whilst this is understandable given the relatively slight degrees of power being contested, this uncaring approach clearly infuriated the Welsh Conservatives.

There was however indications that even influential members of the older right-wing of the Conservative Party were beginning to come around to the idea of devolution. Lord Griffiths of Fforestfach in a lecture at the Institute of Welsh Politics in Aberystwyth would discuss the change in his view on devolution:

⁴⁷ ‘Squabbling like Blue Tits on a Peanut Bag, *Western Mail*, 25th February 2003

It became clear that the Welsh Assembly would provide a more informed debate on Welsh issues because it would draw on a greater number of people with first-hand knowledge on the subject matter. It would also allow much greater time for matters such as education, health, agriculture and the language to be debated at a deeper level than was possible at Westminster. It would encourage politicians in Wales to listen, at greater length and with greater care to the concerns of the electorate than had hitherto been the case. It would mean that un-elected bodies would be more transparent and accountable because of their new status. Finally, I believe that the very existence of an Assembly at the heart of Welsh political life must strengthen the identity of Wales and its language, which in my judgement are important, if not critical, for the preservation of Welsh culture.”⁴⁸

Statements such as these were promising for the prospects of the party in Wales. The fact that a Conservative Party grandee of the thatcherite wing of the party had changed his view so completely on the question of devolution brought hope to the possibilities of greater understanding and support for devolution in the London party. Whilst Lord Griffiths is indeed Welsh and an element of his statement indicates a desire to actively preserve Welsh identity and culture, the lecture is still indicative that acceptance of the Assembly as an institution that was going to stay is apparent. Traditional small-government positions on government structure, the opposition of an extra layer between the council borough level and national level had been tested by the success of the Assembly. The reality of the Assembly experience was that local councils did not lose the power they had before the existence of the Assembly. Also the clear opportunities for Welsh affairs to be studied and

⁴⁸ Lord Griffiths, *A Conservative Agenda for Wales*, Institute of Welsh Politics Annual lecture, November 2002

promoted to far greater degrees were beginning to permeate through the party structure into England.

Conclusion to Chapter 1

The chapter has explored the experience of the Conservative Party during the first Assembly. The challenges of the party have been discussed and the developments of dealing with those challenges have been explored. The following succinctly explains the developments and themes vital to understanding the Conservatives in the first Assembly.

- Party Leadership – The struggle between the unionist and moderate factions of the party was expressed through the competition between Rod Richards and Nick Bourne. The unpopularity of Richards within the Welsh party combined with the personal events regarding Richards would, to the benefit of the party in Wales lead to the ascendancy of Bourne as party leader. Had Richards solidified his position as leader, the future prospects of the party in Wales would have been far less positive as debate and eventual unity on the question of devolution would not have existed to the degree that it has under the leadership of Bourne.
- The Role of Individuals – The party was dominated by particular individuals both within and outside of Wales. Understandably the national party leader played a role in forming Conservative policy. William Hague would provide constructive comments on devolution which would also be used to criticise the perceived hypocrisy of Labour party positions on devolution. During this period also Bourne instituted his own vision for the Conservative Party in Wales and members such as David Melding began to formulate and discuss a possible new way for the

Conservatives in Wales. As noted by this researcher, none of this would have been possible had Rod Richards remained the leader of the Welsh party.

Chapter 2

2003 - 2007: The Second Assembly

The 2003 Welsh Assembly election would prove to be extremely successful for the Labour party. The original surge that Plaid Cymru experienced during the election of the First Assembly seemingly waned and Labour recovered the traditional Labour strongholds seats of Rhondda, Llanelli and Islwyn.⁴⁹

The Conservatives, although failing to make any substantial electoral number gains in either the first-past-the-post or the additional member system managed to return two more members leading to a total Conservative representation of eleven.⁵⁰ Ultimately the election solidified the Welsh Conservative party position of being ultimately pro-devolution in scope and thus maintained the possibility of becoming future coalition partners in government at some point.

The internal election of the Deputy Presiding Officer of the Assembly would also bring some interest from the Conservatives. The process was marked by parties largely unwilling to 'lose' a member to the position. David Melding noted that he had considered standing for Deputy Presiding Officer however such a decision was vetoed by leader Nick Bourne. Ultimately the position would be occupied by the Independent John Marek. It was believed that a number of Labour members voted instead for the independent Marek over the Labour candidate Peter Law. As Law noted:

⁴⁹ Office for National Statistics, *UK Electoral Statistics 2003*
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=319>

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

“It is quite extraordinary that not a single member of the Labour Group has told me they were voting for me. I may have got a few votes from them, but in the main it seems the Labour Group voted for John Marek – who only a few days ago stood against and beat the official party candidate in Wrexham.”⁵¹

If anything this experience illustrated the unpopularity of the position of Deputy Presiding Officer due to the role essentially removing a completely active Assembly Member. This unpopularity was echoed amongst all of the parties through their actions including, as noted the Conservatives.

Shadow Ministerial Positions

As the Assembly organically moved from a corporate structure and began to resemble a more traditional parliamentary one, the parties out of power declared their shadow appointments for the Second Assembly. A notable event for the Conservatives occurred in this matter whereby David Melding decided not to obtain a shadow ministerial position. This was due to Melding wishing to concentrate his time and efforts upon developing a case for a Federalised United Kingdom:

⁵¹ *Western Mail*, 8th May 2003

*"I have spoken out on this but I have not been able to pursue it with any persistence. But there is a very coherent, centre-right argument for a federal Britain with primary law-making powers for the Welsh Assembly."*⁵²

This kind of reasoning is indicative of the new kind of Conservatism that was beginning to develop within the Conservative group. Whilst this argument was not accepted party policy or even widely considered in the Conservative Party outside of Wales it demonstrated the national character of the party in Wales and the new ideas that were being brought forth at the time. It will be noted again that very few to absolutely none of these debates and policy developments would have existed had Rod Richards remained party leader in Wales.

A New National Party Leader

After the failure of Iain Duncan Smith to provide a lasting base of support within the Conservative Party or to challenge the polling supremacy of Tony Blair, a new leader of the national party would emerge. Michael Howard, an experienced party member who served as a minister under both Margaret Thatcher and John Major would ascend to leadership of the national party. A further dimension to this development is the fact that Howard was Welsh, born and raised in Llanelli. Thus, interest in Wales and the Assembly itself should increase due to the party leaders' personal association with Wales. This would aid against the concerns of Conservative AM Glyn Davies who would remark during this time that part of the reason the party were unpopular in Wales was due to the party focusing on the wider United Kingdom instead of Wales⁵³. The unpopularity of the Conservatives in Wales was

⁵² *Western Mail*, 14th May 2003

⁵³ 'This is our year ahead, says Tory', *Western Mail*, 20th December 2003

clear in a statement that Michael Howard made during a visit to Wales upon becoming party leader:

“If you grew up in Llanelli and you were a natural rebel interested in politics then you had to be a Conservative.”⁵⁴

The claim is clearly an attempt for Howard to appear to be somewhat of a political maverick given the context and history of the dominance of the Labour party in Llanelli. This statement whilst communicating that Howard is different to other Conservative leaders also is a truthful indicator of the severe paucity of Conservative Party support in much of Wales. The recognition that the image of the Conservative Party on a national level had to change was also echoed within the Conservative Party in Wales. As noted previously, the traditional strongholds of the Conservatives in Wales had been the largely anglicised and English-speaking regions of South Wales and Pembrokeshire. Thus an act of ‘rebellion’ against the majority would be uniting with the Conservative party in Wales.

In March 2004 the results of the Richard Commission were published. This project was commissioned under the leadership of Lord Ivor Richard to:

“Establish an independent Commission into the powers and electoral arrangements of the National Assembly in order to ensure that it is able to operate in the best interests of the people of Wales. This review should investigate inter alia the extension of proportionality in the composition of the Assembly, and of the relevant competencies devolved.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ ‘Tory leader focuses on Welsh roots on a trip back home’, *Western Mail*, 6th December 2003

⁵⁵ ‘Putting Wales First’, National Assembly for Wales, October 2001

The results of the commission noted many fundamental problems with the structure and processes of devolution. Ultimately the major concerns of the commission noted the asymmetric nature of devolution within the United Kingdom and the problematic structural arrangements of the corporate model. More relevant to the crux of this particular dissertation, the effects of the Conservative administration before the ascendancy of the Labour Party under Tony Blair noted to have contributed to the argument for devolution. Amongst the major effects of Conservative policy was what the commission referred to as the “John Redwood factor”⁵⁶. The comment referring to the political gaffe that Redwood performed whilst pretending to sing the Welsh national anthem at a Welsh Conservative Party function where clearly Redwood had no idea what the words were. The event encapsulated the Conservatives ignorance and lack of effort in Welsh affairs before devolution. This sense of course would affect public perceptions of the Conservatives in Wales throughout the period of devolution. This very image is one which the Conservatives must contend with and move away from.

2004 would also be the year of local council and European Parliament elections. In terms of council election results the Conservatives in Wales once again showed a degree of maintained strength by holding on to a number of constituencies and by also regaining Monmouthshire council. Whilst Monmouthshire is a heavily anglicised and thus traditionally a stronghold for Conservative support in Wales, the taking of the council indicated a return from the underperforming experienced before. Ultimately the results saw the Conservatives return to a healthy average based upon their past results. Whilst not a breakthrough for the party, a return to form would of course be welcome and would provide an extra degree of

⁵⁶ IWA ‘Responding to Richard’ conference, Cardiff, 23rd April 2004

morale for future electoral competitions. Through winning seven new seats in both Conwy and Cardiff, the party showed strong indications of being able to mount a serious challenge for the seats of Cardiff North and Clwyd West in the general election of 2005. Conservative MEP Jonathan Evans stated:

“That, for my party is the first step towards re-establishing ourselves in Wales.”⁵⁷

Further, comments on the Richard commission continued to be expressed from the Conservative Party. David Melding continued to be the mouthpiece and intellect behind a move for the Conservative Party to actively support devolution as an idea. Melding criticised the party in particular for “bizarrely” embracing the approach to devolution that the Labour Party had taken. Melding also argued that the party policy unit ought to use the Richard commission findings in order to formulate a consistent model of devolution that would put the party at the forefront of devolution policy. This would create institutions that were “fit for purpose”⁵⁸ Whilst at this point there was a muted response to such a proposal in the wider party, attacks upon such a position were not sounded either. The role of David Melding as an individual in forming a progressive policy for devolution in the Conservative Party would continue to be widely acknowledged. Further support for the positions of Melding which included the institution of a fully-legislative Welsh Parliament was voiced by party leader Nick Bourne. At a St David’s day at Cardiff University to the Welsh Governance Centre Bourne presented the positions of the party based upon the findings of the Richard Commission.⁵⁹ Ultimately, the party supported the promotion of full-legislative powers although did not agree that the number of Assembly Members should be increased from 60

⁵⁷ BBC Wales website www.bbc.co.uk/Wales, 11th June 2004

⁵⁸ ‘Richard is Tories best ally’, *Western Mail*, 26th July 2004

⁵⁹ Nick Bourne, *Welsh Conservatism: A Chance to Shine*, Welsh Governance Centre Lecture, 9th March 2005

to 80.⁶⁰ Bourne noted that only a minority of Conservative Assembly members opposed the findings of the Richard Commission. Importantly a key member of the party, the shadow secretary of state for Wales, Bill Wiggin would actively campaign to abolish the Assembly citing problems with the NHS in Wales as a major reason for abolishing the institution.⁶¹ The existence of diametrically opposed positions within the party, especially considering that these views were held by the shadow secretary of state for Wales provided negative equity for those in the Welsh party who had already committed to the devolution process for the past six years. It was clear that even after six years of devolution, outside of the Welsh arm of the party, the idea was still rigorously opposed by the majority of members to a point where the relevant shadow minister would publicly declare campaigning against the institution. Positions such as these undermine the message that Bourne had been trying to convey to the Welsh electorate. If Bourne and Melding were to be successful in their goals for the party, they had to convince at least an influential minority in the wider party that their position of working with devolution was not only positive but also in the interests of maintaining the British union. Such public espousals against devolution would not endear the party to the wider Welsh public and remind them of the 'Redwood factor' mentioned previously.

Such positions would also become increasingly at odds with the views of the general Welsh public. In February of 2005 ICM in conjunction with the BBC conducted a poll regarding the establishment of a Welsh parliament with full legislative power. In that 61% of respondents

⁶⁰ Nick Bourne, Welsh Conservatism: A Chance to Shine, Welsh Governance Centre Lecture, 9th March 2005

⁶¹ *Manifesto*, S4C, 23rd January 2005

considered increased powers as a favourable development whereas 34% were opposed to such a measure.⁶² The majority of respondents thus supported an increase in powers for the Assembly. Quite what proportion of those individuals were Conservatives is not known, however, any position that sought to repeal the Assembly would now only be supported by a smaller minority of the Welsh electorate. Therefore, if the Conservatives hoped for any continued maintenance of their position and eventual progression in Wales, they would have to cement their position as a party committed to the devolution process.

The 2005 General Election

The election would prove to be a period of growth for the wider party, with a small but substantial increase of 33 MP's.⁶³ Whilst the party failed to win the election, the result continued the slow but steady re-affirmation of the party as a serious contender for government. Slowly, old hatreds of the party were becoming clouded through time and the party began to successfully distance itself from the disabling image of the past. The central party manifesto discussed devolution, but appeared to give greater concern and support for Scottish devolution as opposed to the situation in Wales:

“Conservatives believe that the Union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland brought benefits to all parts of our United Kingdom. We remain strongly committed to making a success of devolution in Scotland, so that it delivers for the Scottish people. In

⁶² ICM BBC Welsh Poll, February 2005

⁶³ Office for National Statistics, *UK Electoral Statistics 2005*
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=319>

*Wales we will work with the Assembly and give the Welsh people a referendum on whether to keep the Assembly in its current form, increase its powers or abolish it.*⁶⁴

As a positive, the previous position of actively opposing devolution with an adherence to a blind, absolute and non-contextual unionism had been replaced with a neutral position that sought democratic accountability in decision making. However, by not actively supporting further steps towards full legislation, as in Scotland, the London party continued to adhere to the New Labour form of asymmetric devolution as David Melding had criticised. From this position this author senses a degree of pragmatic opposition to devolution. The Conservatives, seeing the success and popularity of a fully-legislated Scottish Parliament would understand that absolute opposition would weaken the party in Scotland even further. In Wales however, due to less certainty and the weaker degree of devolution, it would appear that the national party still considered Wales to be an area where devolution could eventually be repealed, if not through direct government action but through the ballot box of a referendum. Either way, the neutrality of the position and the support for democratic decision-making on the part of the people of Wales is a safe and sensible position.

After the general election of 2005, Michael Howard would stand down as leader of the national party.⁶⁵ The next leader would be David Cameron⁶⁶, an individual considered to be a centrist in the party would be a somewhat welcome development for the party in Wales.

Whilst Cameron had not overtly supported devolution, he nevertheless voiced concerns

⁶⁴ Michael Howard, *It's Time for Action/The British Dream*, The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto, 2005

⁶⁵ BBC News, *Howard will stand down as leader*, May 6th 2005
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/frontpage/4521941.stm

⁶⁶ BBC News, *Cameron chosen as new Tory leader*, December 6th 2005
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4502652.stm

over the process. The 2005 election had led to the successful attainment of three Conservative MP's in Wales who all were considered to be at least somewhat anti-devolution. Thus, the division between the views of the national party and the Welsh party could be continued through the back-benches, if not through official policy.

Further developments involving the appointment of Cameron as leader involved the new shadow cabinet. The unpopular shadow secretary of state, Bill Wiggin would be replaced by Cheryl Gillan the Member of Parliament for Chesham and Amersham⁶⁷. This move indicated a desired change since Wiggin clearly was not a figure that instilled confidence in either the electorate of the Welsh Conservatives due to his staunchly anti-devolutionist position. Also, the Conservatives would during this period abandon their promise of a multi-option referendum which would include the option of abolishing the Assembly. This action would provide a degree of encouragement for pro-devolutionists in the Welsh party such as Melding. In essence this development indicated that central Conservative policy no-longer considered a repeal of devolution a viable policy. Thus, this was the first time that all parties represented in the Assembly were committed to maintaining its existence in one form or another. This would be seen as both a vote of confidence in the Assembly as an institution of government by the Conservatives and also one for the Welsh Conservative group operating in the Assembly.

⁶⁷ BBC News, *David Cameron appoints Cheryl Gillan as Welsh Secretary*, May 12th 2010
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/8677418.stm>

Continuing this into the summer of 2006, the positions of the shadow secretary of state Cheryl Gillan began to appear to be lock-step with Welsh party leader Nick Bourne. The appointment of David Cameron as party leader appeared to have increased the degree of London party agreement with the Welsh group in the Assembly and ultimately trust in the policies that it was producing. This author identifies this development as the outcome of two specific factors:

- David Cameron – The centrist position of Cameron on devolution and his clear personal ability to listen⁶⁸ and trust the regional segments of his party that specialised in particular issues is a clear factor in the greater consistency of central party policy on devolution with that of the Welsh party.
- Time – The passage of time itself allows the establishment of normalcy, traditions and the political trust that stems from such developments. By 2006 the Assembly had existed for almost seven years and the ability of the Welsh group to remain both relevant to the debates of the institution and to maintain their position was clear to the London party. Thus by this point the Welsh party had received a greater degree of respect and influence in terms of the perceptions of the wider Conservative party. This would make developing and promoting pro-devolutionist policy positions far easier for the party leader Bourne and the intellectual stimulus behind these positions, David Melding.

Further developments of the Cameron leadership would also lead to a change of policy in terms of dealing with Britain's economic problems. Whereas post-Margaret Thatcher,

⁶⁸ For greater insight into the personality and political thought of Cameron see, *After Blair: David Cameron and the Conservative Tradition* by Kieran O'Hara and *Cameron on Cameron* by Dylan Jones.

national party leaders had proposed and discussed greater degrees of privatisation, the message would shift from discussing such terms towards the language of a philosophy of localism.⁶⁹ Also, there was a clear acknowledgement by the central party that the Conservatives still had a lot of work to do in order to dispel the traditional notions of the Conservative party being an ‘English’ party and thus anti-devolution:

“...despite our fears in 1997. We freely acknowledge that devolution has not weakened Britain. Our task is now to use devolution imaginatively to make Britain stronger.”⁷⁰

These comments would be the greatest indication so far that the higher echelons of the party were ready to work with devolution in the same way that the majority of the Welsh group in the Assembly has. Although the work by Daniel Hannan MEP and Douglas Carswell MP calls for a greater role for local councils, it would appear that the Conservatives were instituting a modified form of ‘The Plan’ that took into account the benefits of devolution.

Amongst other portions of the manifesto would be indications that the kind of federal model, as proposed by David Melding would be applied through promises:

“A Welsh Conservative government would: promote the establishment of a Devolution Forum between the devolved Home Nations and Westminster to allow for the exchange of ideas between Governments in the different parts of the United Kingdom...”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Daniel Hannan & Douglas Carswell, *The Plan: Twelve Months to Renew Britain*, 20th September 2008

⁷⁰ Welsh Conservatives, *Vote Welsh Conservative for a change*, April 2007, p. 35

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Continuing, the second major promise on devolution would be:

“...establish procedures to encourage public participation in the work of the National Assembly and the Welsh Assembly government. Mechanisms would include a strengthened petitions process and the use of peoples’ juries to assist policy development...”

This ascribes a more conciliatory approach with the public and is related to the utilisation of civil society⁷² as a means for obtaining an informed and engaged policy process. There are some who argue⁷³ that this kind of approach is a form of QUANGO⁷⁴ and does nothing but create official organisations of representation that actually detract from engagement with social organisations that lack funding and connections to government.

Other promises within the manifesto would be more culturally-based. These promises would include:

“Seek to establish St. David’s Day as a national holiday; introduce a Welsh symbol on car number plates; ensure that a separate Welsh option appears on census forms together with a question on the use of Welsh; petition the Queen to establish a Welsh order of chivalry.”

These cultural promises would take on a surprisingly nationalistic tone that identified the Welsh Conservatives acceptance and promotion of Welsh cultural identity. Indeed these promises, particularly the first one appear to fall into the ‘populist’ milieu of political

⁷² A notable work on civil society and its use in the policy process of the National Assembly is *Revitalising Democracy: Devolution and Civil Society in Wales* (2007) by Elin Royles

⁷³ Lesley Hodgson (2003) *Manufactured civil society: Counting the cost*, *Critical Social Policy*, 24(2)

⁷⁴ Quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation – These organisations would become popular tools under the Conservative administration of Margaret Thatcher, 1979-1990, particularly from late 1980’s onwards. The development of the future home of the National Assembly, the re-developed Cardiff Bay (formerly Tiger Bay) would begin with the creation of the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation, itself a QUANGO.

promises. Whilst showing a support for Welsh national identity and recognition, they are also political promises that would appeal to voters less interested in the details of devolved government. It is of course easy to condemn such policies as mere fancy given that the Conservatives had very little chance of obtaining control of the Assembly after the election. However these promises are still relevant and illustrate a great shift from the cautious and in some cases, outright hostile treatment of both devolution and Welsh cultural nationalism that the party had previously operated. This manifesto is a clear indication that the pro-devolutionist and conciliatory arm of the Welsh party held a now dominant position in the party leadership which, based upon previous success could only mean a positive future for the party in Wales.

These developments would place the Welsh group in the Assembly in a positive position for performing successfully at the next national Assembly election. Whilst it was highly unlikely that the party would obtain major gains, the sense of pessimism and caution that coloured the build-up to the 2003 election for the party had been muted significantly.

2007 Election for the National Assembly of Wales

The election would prove to be a positive one for the Welsh Conservative party. The party would receive percentage gains of 2.5% in both first and second vote preferences.⁷⁵ This would lead to the gain of a single AM, taking the total Conservative complement in the

⁷⁵ Office of National Statistics, *UK Electoral Statistics 2007* found at: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=319>

Assembly from 12 to 13.⁷⁶ This outcome would make it the second straight Assembly election where the Conservatives had gained new seats in the Assembly. Importantly for the Conservatives the election was also an event which expressed a collapse in the Labour Party vote in Wales. Whilst the 2003 election had been extremely successful for that party, by 2007 under the leadership of Gordon Brown and the growing public opposition to the incumbent government the Labour Party in Wales would suffer. Indeed the result for the Labour Party, leading to a loss of four seats, one of which the Conservatives would profit from was the worst experienced by the party since 1918.⁷⁷ This result would lead to Labour no-longer having an overall majority in the Assembly, thus requiring a coalition partner for control. This position would be filled by Plaid Cymru.

The results could have been even better for the Conservatives as a number of seats were extremely marginal. These seats in order starting with the smallest marginal were: Labour AMs by 83 votes in Vale of Glamorgan, 92 in Vale of Clwyd, 511 in Delyn, 1,119 in Clwyd South, and 1,192 in Gower.⁷⁸ All of these seats were Labour held, thus illustrating the absolutely weakened position that the Labour Party faced in Wales. Ultimately these results would further entrench Nick Bourne's position unquestionably as the leader of the party in Wales. The possibility of a leadership challenge and the disruptive effects that are emitted from them were practically zero.

⁷⁶ Office of National Statistics, *UK Electoral Statistics 2007* found at: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=319>

⁷⁷ Further, the nature of the 1918 election led to the Labour Party standing candidates in just three-quarters of all Welsh seats. Thus in an absolute sense the Assembly result was the worst result ever experienced by the party in Wales.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 'Office of National Statistics'

Conclusion to Chapter 2

The Second Assembly would prove to be an experience of slow growth and maintenance for the Conservative group in the Assembly. The main notable development by the end of this period was the apparent change in how the national party leadership perceived the group in the Assembly. Whilst the ineffective leadership of Iain Duncan Smith and the distant approach to devolution maintained by Michael Howard failed to bring attention to the Welsh party, the policy goals of the Cameron leadership appeared to not only coincide with the Welsh leadership's position but also erred responsibility on such matters to the Welsh party. Indeed a greater degree of trust in devolved affairs was placed on the shoulders of the Welsh arm. This came about through the personality of Cameron, a uniting and moderate figure with the party and also the now largely solidified and experienced Welsh party in the Assembly. The national party leadership was thus prepared to listen to the Welsh arm as the experience, positive outcomes and abilities of the Conservative AM's gained respect within the wider party.

The Third Assembly: 2007 - Present

With the formation of the Labour/Plaid coalition⁷⁹⁸⁰, the Conservative Party would become the official party of opposition in the Assembly. As noted previously, the slow return to a Westminster-like system after the failure of the corporate structure and the reforms brought forward by the Government of Wales Act 2006 enabled the Conservatives to

⁷⁹ BBC News, *Historic Labour/Plaid deal agreed*, June 27th 2007
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/6245040.stm>

⁸⁰ BBC News, *Labour-Plaid coalition is sealed*, July 7th 2007
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/6278848.stm>

compete in a political terrain that was a slight degree more similar to that of the Westminster Parliament. Further, this official position as the party of opposition would allow the Conservatives to further enhance the relevancy of their presence in the National Assembly. During this time, rumours that Nick Bourne would stand down at the end of the Third Assembly and take a seat in the House of Lords came to the fore. The decision of Jonathan Morgan, a clear favourite candidate to be the next leader of the Welsh party not to stand for Parliamentary election and remain in the Assembly was touted as a further indication that Bourne would leave.⁸¹

The major task for the Welsh group in the Assembly was the question of a devolution referendum for parliamentary powers as advocated by part four of the Government of Wales Act 2006. Whilst the party was united in the Assembly it still had to contend with three Welsh MP's that were avowedly anti-devolution. This meant that the party found difficulties in promising a referendum on increasing powers for the Welsh Assembly as such a declaration could lead to an embarrassing exposition of the differences of opinion of the group in the Assembly and the MP's. The party would suffer at this point for having no conciliatory strategy that could bridge the gap of difference between the two positions.⁸²

Once again the theme of relevancy would play a role in at this moment. The party, although locked in the predicament as described above, had to play a role in the debate on increased powers so as to maintain their relevancy on this matter and to play a role in influencing

⁸¹ 'Tory AM won't stand for Parliament', *Western Mail*, 9th June 2007: <http://icwales.icnetwork.co.uk/news/wales-news/2007/06/09/tory-am-won-t-stand-for-parliament-91466-19268723/>

⁸² Stephen Crabbe MP, 'The Devolution Experiment is leading to socialism and separatism.' *ConservativeHome*, 24th October 2007 <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2007/10/stephen-crabb-m.html>

wider Assembly policy. Further the position of official opposition would generate a political expectation for them to play a role in it.

Further developments would sour the hopes of the Welsh group as David Davies MP would declare that he would actively campaign for a 'NO' vote in a potential future referendum of legislative powers for the Assembly.⁸³ The only third option for the party would be to support the maintenance of the status quo. However, a study on the state of devolution in Wales, instituted by David Cameron and overseen by Lord Wyn Roberts would argue that the current Assembly was not working and had failed to capture the hearts of the people of Wales. Further the report would recommend a large scale investigation into devolution that would be carried out by a future Conservative government.⁸⁴ The report, although intended to end the debate on whether the Conservative Party should support the institution of a full Welsh Parliament would fail to do that and draw attention to the division in the party between the Assembly members and the Members of Parliament in Wales.

Later on 2009, two developments would become significant for the party. The Welsh party conference was conducted during a time where polling responses indicated that the Conservative Party had a sizeable lead for the next general election and could realistically

⁸³ M. Shipton, 'Tory's No to Assembly Lawmaking', *Western Mail*, 4th September 2008: <http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/2008/09/04/tory-s-no-to-assemblylawmaking-91466-21670799/>

⁸⁴ A. Browne, 'Tory study urges devolution probe', *Western Mail*, 5th November 2008: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/wales_politics/7710828.stm

win it. Also, David Melding would produce a work which explored and communicated the development of his thought on devolution and British federalism, *Will Britain Exist in 2020?*

2010 would be an extremely important year for the Conservative Party. With the increasing unpopularity of Gordon Browns government and the polling success of the Conservatives for many months, the possibility of the Conservatives taking power at the 2010 election would be likely. As for the manifesto on devolution, a breakthrough on promises would be made:

“We are a unionist party and we will not put the Union at risk. But we support devolution and are committed to making it work for all countries. We will take forward the proposals of the Calman Commission, grant a referendum on greater powers for the Welsh Assembly, and support the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland. We will rebalance the unfairness in the voting system for devolved issues in Parliament.”⁸⁵

Whilst this statement is guarded and does not explicitly show support for the creation of a Welsh Parliament, it does however finally provide an answer on whether the party supported a referendum on powers. Thus the party appeared to be willing to work with devolution at a level greater than comments issued in any previous party manifesto. The position has a sense of being viewed as a means of reforming the current union through devolution and making those ties stronger through a public sense of greater regional accountability and relevancy.

⁸⁵ David Cameron, *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*, Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto, 2010, p. 83

“We will not stand in the way of the referendum on further legislative powers requested by the Welsh Assembly. The people of Wales will decide the outcome and Conservatives will have a free vote. But our priority remains getting people back into work and strengthening the Welsh economy. So we will seek ways to work with the Welsh Assembly Government to increase economic growth and improve people’s quality of life.”⁸⁶

The main intention of this statement is to defer attention from the question of Welsh devolution and note the economy of Wales as a priority before it. The most interesting and important policy claim in this is that the Conservatives would have a free vote. This decision would indicate that the party would not officially campaign either for a ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. Vote on the matter. Thus it would allow party members to make public statements and campaign on either position. Whilst this would help somewhat the pro-devolution position of the Welsh group in the Assembly more than any previous policy on the question, the possibility of party members actively campaigning for a ‘No’ vote could lead to a degree of embarrassment for the Welsh group. Whilst Bourne would wish to create an image of a united party in Wales, his remit does not extend to the Welsh Members of Parliament.

Ultimately, the prospects for the Welsh group in the Assembly were far superior to the potential position experienced by the group at the onset of devolution. The thesis will now move into its conclusion.

⁸⁶ David Cameron, *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain, Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto, 2010*, p. 83

Conclusion

In this work, the experiences and challenges of the Conservative party during the age of devolution has been explored. The first great challenge for the party was to maintain relevancy as it had opposed the formation of the very institution that it practiced within. The fact of the Conservative party being the only party that actively campaigned for a 'No' vote instantly associated the party with a staunchly anti-devolution position. Early attempts at maintaining a policy of absolute opposition to the Assembly failed as it became clear that public support for the Assembly grew and was maintained to a degree that indicated that the Assembly and devolution was to continue.

David Melding

As noted by the findings of this work, the role of particular individuals in forming Conservative policy in Wales in a devolution-positive direction for the party has been vital. David Melding stands out as a principal thinker and influencer in terms of the party position and approach. It is clear that his thought and approach towards devolution has garnered the Conservatives a lasting base in the Assembly and has more than maintained the relevancy of the party in the institution.

Millbank and Cardiff

The importance of the interplay between the National party based in London and the Welsh arm in Cardiff was also clear from the onset. The desire for a congruent position between the party in Wales and that of its' companion in London would be great so as to provide the image of a united, wider Conservative Party. This desire was of course fraught with a great many obstacles, amongst them the disparity between the unionism of Welsh Conservative

MP's and the conciliatory moderation of the majority of Welsh AM's. Also, the difference of opinion on devolution and the strategies for engaging it differed and suffered from a lack of consistency, partly due to the relatively high turnover of party leaders within ten years.

Factional Battles

Ultimately, the pro-devolution conservative faction within the Assembly would win the battle of ideas and gain the influence it required with the national party by the end of the 00's. The role of party leader Nick Bourne and member David Melding was absolutely essential in firstly uniting the party under a position that at the very least worked with devolution without opposing it and to advocate new ideas with the aim of maintaining the union. Amongst these ideas would be the creation of a federalised British state as expressed in *Will Britain Survive Beyond 2020?*⁸⁷ This position would be informed by an overt desire to maintain the British Union through a federal structure. It is the view of this researcher that the embracement of such a position is an essential means for its maintenance. This is supported by the fact of the Conservatives gaining support and maintaining relevancy in Assembly affairs by supporting itself at the forefront of debates on devolution and in distancing itself from the legacy of the national Conservative Party. Blind adherence to unionism and absolute opposition to change is not a productive means of remaining relevant, neither is it a means by which the British union can be spared. In actuality, it is such opposition that has fed perceptions within the Welsh electorate that the Conservative Party was anti-Welsh. Staunch unionism would have led to the nullification of the party in

⁸⁷ Melding, D., *Will Britain Survive Beyond 2020?*, (Cardiff: Institute of Welsh Affairs) 2009

Wales as any kind of serious contender and inversely loosening the bond between the electorate of Wales and the wider United Kingdom. This conciliatory position employed by the Welsh conservatives is consistent with the philosophy of Conservatism when dealing with change. It is a consistent expression of ideas on change expressed by Edmund Burke and David Hume and developed by Michael Oakeschott and Roger Scruton.

For now, it appears that the Welsh group in the Assembly has won the intellectual and practical policy battle against the staunchly unionist elements of the wider party. This does not however mean that opposition has been completely undermined. Ultimately the Conservative Party will continue to retain elements of reactionary unionism in both its membership and support. Like any party it will contain older elements of reactionary ideological prejudice that have been ingrained into members over time.

The Future

Whilst it would be foolish to make exacting claims as to the future prospects of the party in Wales, it is however worth considering the possibilities. The experience of the party as discussed in this dissertation has indicated that the Conservative Party contains the adaptability and leadership that is required for the party to remain relevant within the Welsh sphere. The development of a Welsh arm capable of creating independent policy and further, engendering the trust of the central party in London has helped to enable this success. With the ascendancy of the party to power in the 2010 general election, the party has the opportunity of actively pursuing a progressive devolutionary position and proving

that the party leadership outside of Wales is committed to it through action and not merely political promises. If the party in Wales can maintain unity and if the party in London appears committed to Welsh devolution and thus radically different to previous Conservative administrations, then the prospects of the Conservatives in Wales will continue to be at least somewhat positive. With the nature of a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition in Westminster, the possibility of cooperation between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in the Assembly would be something extremely interesting as a development.

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