

Labour's Crisis: Plaid Cymru, The Conservatives, and the Decline of the Labour Party in North-West Wales, 1960-1974

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It wasn't so long ago that British labour historiography was dominated by more or less celebratory accounts of the career of the Labour Party. As its title suggests, though, Andrew Edwards' book is a sure sign that the times have changed. *Labour's Crisis* confirms a historiographical shift from celebration towards post-mortem, and details the breakdown of Labour's political hegemony in north-west Wales during the 1960s and 1970s. Its argument represents an attempt to understand the dynamics of British politics within a specific regional context, and reflects the growing historiographical realisation of the importance of 'place' in political history. It is based upon extensive and meticulous research, and it addresses a space – which is as much conceptual as it is geographical – in our understanding of mid-to-late 20th-century British politics. This book should, therefore, be of interest not just to historians of Wales, but to political historians more generally.

Labour's Crisis is sharply focused upon the politics of north-west Wales in the 1960s and early 1970s. Its central political narrative is, however, set within a wider analysis of the region's society and politics in the post-war period. This addresses the development of Labour's political base after 1945, and discusses the way in which Labour politicians, principally Goronwy Roberts, T. W. Jones and Cledwyn Hughes, built upon established Welsh radical traditions to establish a firm Labour hegemony in the region. Despite Labour's difficulties at a national (UK) level in the 1950s and early 1960s, these politicians – all of whom were native Welsh speakers embedded in their local communities – were aided by the absence of any credible alternative. The Labour Party had successfully managed to gain the mantle of the 'Party of Wales', and its competitors were either moribund (the Liberals), seen as anti-Welsh (the Conservatives), or were the

preserve of a cultural elite (Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru). As the 1960s progressed, however, a changing socio-economic context began to create problems for Labour. The manifest failure of the majority in north-west Wales to share in the benefits of a new affluent, more individualistic, British society created a paradoxical set of challenges. At a regional level these revolved around attempts to deal with the legacy of a declining heavy industrial base, high levels of unemployment and a deficient housing stock. These issues were, however, supplemented by a range of cultural and linguistic concerns arising from the contrasting processes of depopulation, in-migration and second home ownership. Despite some success in attracting new industries to the region after the Second World War, Labour was unable to turn the socio-economic tide, and during the 1960s a mounting set of difficulties began to undermine the party, rendering its regional hegemony vulnerable.

Edwards details this process with admirable clarity and provides a range of well-presented and easily digestible statistical information to support his discussion. Importantly, his analysis does not fall into the trap of over-determinism. While clearly establishing the socio-economic parameters of political change, he suggests that it was the way in which political parties responded to the conditions around them that was critical, and his central narrative takes up this theme. It does so in a logically structured and rational fashion, dealing first with the development and limitation of Labour's appeal in the 1960s, and then analysing in turn the growing challenge presented by Plaid Cymru and the Conservatives during that decade. When Labour returned to power in 1964, it is argued, its modernising aspirations at a national (UK) level were in tune with local concerns in north-west Wales. A combination of its increasingly enlightened attitude towards devolution and its advocacy of centralised state planning as a spur to regional development, alongside tangible promises on issues such as housing and healthcare, proved highly attractive. Indeed, by 1964 Labour's electoral dominance of north-west Wales was total. Nevertheless, as a tide of economic problems began to submerge the Labour Government in the late 1960s, its aspirations parted from political and economic reality, and its policies began to look distinctly threadbare. By the late 1960s Labour faced a crisis in north-west Wales, which was fueled by rising unemployment and cultural anguish. Its local organisation was falling into decay, and a chain of empty state-built factories stood testimony to its failing policies.

This crisis was all the more deadly because, for the first time in the post-war period, its opponents were offering a serious challenge across the region. Plaid Cymru, while still managing to retain the energy of a protest movement, had, by the end of the decade, developed realistic political aims, a credible economic policy and a robust local organisation. Emerging figures such as Dafydd Wigley and Dafydd Elis Thomas represented a new realism, and became the party's driving force in the north-west. In some senses the 1960s marked Plaid Cymru's coming of age as a political party. The work of its general secretary, Emrys Roberts, contributed to modernisation at a national (Welsh) level, while the emergence of the radical *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (The Welsh Language Society) allowed Plaid to focus on less controversial and more politically inclusive issues than the Welsh language. At a local level – in contrast to the Labour Party – Plaid was vigorous. The party strengthened its branch structure, developed a more active social calendar and focused upon the recruitment of the young, while the adoption nationally of a range of populist, socialistic policies allowed the party to challenge Labour on its own ideological ground. This is not to mention, of course, the impact of Gwynfor Evans' spectacular election victory at Carmarthen in 1966. Considered together, these developments suggested that by the end of the 1960s Plaid Cymru was breaking out of the culturally exclusive mould within which it had been confined since its foundation in the 1920s.

The Conservatives, on the other hand, had to some extent succeeded in shaking off their image as an alien, anti-Welsh party by the end of the decade. They had always maintained a toe-hold in the region – one of their very few in Wales – among the more affluent, largely retired voters of the northern coastal resorts, and this was reflected electorally in their tenancy of the seat of Conwy from 1951 until 1966. Edwards also demonstrates that elements of the Conservative Party were in reality not as anti-Welsh as popular perceptions often suggested. During the 1950s the party had developed a range of Welsh regional policies, which – despite containing the seeds of the free marketism that were to come to the fore under Margaret Thatcher – were not so far removed from those of the Labour Party (as Goronwy Roberts conceded at the time). Despite a very poor showing at the 1966 General Election, moreover, the socio-economic situation in

the north-west Wales was not wholly discouraging to the Conservatives. The decline of institutions (such as nonconformity and trade unionism) that had traditionally nurtured radicalism, alongside the region's vanishing heavy-industrial base, and increasing levels of in-migration (much of it from regions and social groups less hostile to Conservatism than the indigenous population) all worked to create a more promising environment for a potential Conservative rehabilitation. After 1966, moreover, the party increased its efforts to understand local conditions and organise accordingly. Crucially it selected a Welsh-speaking Welshman with a more than credible cultural profile, Wyn Roberts, to contest the Conwy seat in 1970.

The Labour Party was effectively caught in a vice in north-west Wales, which by the turn of the decade was beginning to close, and Edwards examines this process in the concluding sections of the book. Labour's electoral support dissolved dramatically in the early 1970s. Conwy reverted to the Conservatives in 1970, but more dramatic was the breakthrough made by Plaid Cymru in Meirionnydd and Caernarfonshire in 1974, which is the focus of the book's final chapter. Out of power at Westminster, Labour could do little to address its problems, which multiplied at local, Welsh and UK levels. As the pressure increased upon Labour, divisions over its attitude to Welshness and devolution, which were never far beneath the surface, became increasingly apparent. This made it singularly unsuited to meet what was a polarised challenge in the region from an ascendant Plaid Cymru and a resurgent Conservative Party. After 1974, Labour retained only one seat (Anglesey) in north-west Wales. It lost this in 1979, by which time the party's regional ascendancy was extinct – a process which Edwards discusses in an epilogue tracing 'the road to 1979'. Thus, *Labour's Crisis*, while presenting a close analysis of the period from 1960 to 1974 as its central feature, in fact comprises an analysis that spans from the immediate post-war period to Thatcher's victory in 1979.

This analysis has many virtues. It is based upon an admirably wide range of primary sources, which are effectively and judiciously used. These include the personal papers of key protagonists from within the region, such as Goronwy Roberts, Cledwyn Hughes and Dafydd Elis Thomas, as well as those of important individuals from beyond, such as James Griffiths, George Thomas (Viscount Tonyandy) and Margaret Thatcher. In addition to personal collections, abundant use is made of material from the archives of all of the political parties, which is supplemented by reference to oral interviews, memoirs and a comprehensive range of official publications and newspapers. These sources are, moreover, used to create a balanced and rounded analysis. All of the significant political parties are given equal treatment, including the Conservative Party, which has been too frequently neglected by Welsh historians. In this sense *Labour's Crisis* addresses what has been an inbuilt deficiency in Welsh historiography, which has been dominated for decades by labour historians. While it might still, at a stretch, be considered a work of labour history, Edwards' book thus expands Welsh historiography in two significant ways. Firstly, it interprets the history of the Labour Party as part of a dynamic involving other political parties, rather than a monolithic expression of community solidarity. Secondly it focuses outside of the Labour heartland of south Wales, which has long extended a magnetic attraction to Welsh labour historians, and thus adds a valuable new dimension to studies of the Labour Party in Wales. Both of these developments should be warmly welcomed.

Edwards' analysis, moreover, cuts through some accumulated layers of political mythology. Of equal significance to the restoration of Conservatism to the political narrative is its deconstruction of the mythical, nationalist version of Welsh history. Edwards' argues, on the strength of his study of the north-west, that the idea of a renaissance of Welsh national identity, culminating in a 'rise of nationalism' that swept Plaid Cymru to electoral success, should be treated with caution. Rather, the political reality was more piecemeal and more complex. It was heavily influenced by the creativity, hard work and opportunism of local activists, who by necessity worked with the grain of local conditions. It was, moreover, as much a consequence of the divisions and paradoxes of established labourism as it was a result of any widespread cultural awakening. In Edwards' analysis, a new generation of political figures – from all parties – accedes to the historical narrative, and is allowed to exercise an appropriate level of agency. Its members are discussed in their multiple and parallel roles as inheritors, creators, beneficiaries and, at times, victims of a complex interaction of local, regional and national (both Welsh and UK) circumstances. The political tapestry that emerges will only be partially recognisable to students of mainstream British history. This is not only because Edwards is charting largely unknown historiographical territory, but also because *Labour's Crisis* is healthily revisionist

in its approach. It is also more than a contribution to Welsh historiography alone. Some of the figures that emerge from the narrative – Goronwy Roberts, Cledwyn Hughes and Dafydd Wigley among them – although rooted in Wales and Welshness, played roles that extended significantly beyond Wales. The events of Edwards’ narrative too had an influence upon – and were themselves influenced by – developments beyond the region that is the focus of his book. In this sense *Labour’s Crisis* makes a significant contribution to British, and, as Edwards asserts in his closing paragraph, even international, political historiography. It provides a missing piece of a complex jigsaw puzzle. In so doing it enriches our understanding of the relationship between the ‘centre’ of the British state and its rural, linguistically and culturally distinct north-west Welsh ‘periphery’. It also, however, contributes more widely to the growing and increasingly salient literature on dealignment and politicised national identity.

The most stimulating elements of Edwards’ book are the questions that arise from the intersection of the dual Welsh and British historiography to which it simultaneously belongs. An ever present theme behind his narrative is the interplay between the varying levels of political activity: the local, the regional(s) and the national(s). It is here that his analysis is at its most suggestive. The tension, for example, between national and local success is illustrated by Goronwy Roberts’ loss of popularity as a local MP after his promotion to the Foreign Office. George Thomas’s virulent anti-nationalist polemics in the *Liverpool Daily Post*, which many believed undermined Labour’s image and prospects in north Wales, equally provide a case of clashing regional loyalties within Wales being refracted through the national (UK) media. The overall tension between centralised British politics and regional and national identities within Britain is of course a guiding theme of the book, and it is arguably in this respect that *Labour’s Crisis* raises more questions than it answers.

A central issue here is the nature of Edwards’ spatial definition. As is often the case, it is from a book’s main strengths that its key problems arise. The sharp geographical focus of the analysis in *Labour’s Crisis*, while allowing an admirable development of detail, sometimes leaves the reader wondering about the rationale for Edwards’ definition of his selected region. Frequent references, for example, to the influence upon the politics of the north of the plans for a new town in mid-Wales suggest that the boundaries of ‘north-west Wales’ were more politically permeable and less subject to easy definition than Edwards would allow. It would be interesting to know what conceptual, rather than pragmatic, reasons the author would advance for his choice of regional definition. In the absence of such conceptualisation it might be possible to argue that the text artificially inflates the magnitude of ‘Labour’s crisis’. The book’s sharp chronological focus (notwithstanding the comments made above) may also compound the influence of its geographical selectivity. Edwards argues that political change is the result of long-term processes. Time is, of course, relative, but his analysis actually suggests that political change is rapid and dramatic. The question that arises is whether such a close focus on the background to a handful of parliamentary seats changing hands tends to magnify or overstate the processes that he is examining. From another perspective ‘Labour’s crisis’ might appear as just a little local difficulty. That the events he discusses were part of a more important political narrative is suggested by the fact that when the tectonic plates of politics finally shifted in 1979, opening the way for the total collapse of the post-war consensus, it was (Scottish) nationalism that provided the final push. The role of Wales, north-western or otherwise, in these events is less clearly understood. *Labour’s Crisis* provides some extremely important material towards enabling that understanding, but whether it makes all of the conceptual links that would have enabled the articulation of the local, the regional and the national as factors in this process is less certain.

These comments barely count as criticism, however. Rather, they are a suggestion for an extension of Edwards’ argument. Ultimately books need boundaries, and most boundaries – whether they be around the contents of books or nations – are to some extent arbitrary. What Andrew Edwards has provided is an extremely valuable building block. Given the progress of devolution within Britain, and the importance of re-emerging national identities in the modern world, it is highly likely that more such blocks will follow. The ultimate result will be a rebuilding of British political historiography, which will have implications for our understanding of ourselves, and our relationships with the political structures within which we live.

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