

# How do nationalist parties reform their organisational profiles? The cases of Plaid Cymru and the SNP compared

By Democratic Audit UK

*The SNP swept Scotland's electoral map at the General Election, winning almost all of the Westminster seats on offer. But what of its organisation? **Craig McAngus** argues that 'stateless-nationalist-regionalist' parties like the SNP and Plaid Cymru have, in response to the introduction of devolved assemblies and the incentive of power, become more 'normal' in organisational terms, contributing to their success.*



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The term 'Stateless-Nationalist-Regionalist Party', or SNRP, refers to a family of parties which advocate either or both cultural protection for a national or regional 'minority' within a larger state and increased autonomy for a particular regional or national territory. This autonomy can simply be greater decentralisation and a transfer of some powers from the centre, or it can be full secession from the sovereign state of which they are a part. Beyond this, it is difficult to find further common criteria considering that SNRPs, in Europe at least, are very ideologically diverse and vary from context to context in substantial ways.

When SNRPs began to receive scholarly attention, their study invited a socio-historical approach which aimed to analyse and explain the underlying historical explanations for the continued existence of regional and national minorities within sovereign states, and from that attempted to explain how parties were created out of movements and organisations dedicated to the preservation, recognition and increased autonomy of their region or nation. As we moved into the last quarter of the 20th century, it was obvious that SNRPs were a phenomenon that was likely to endure, and simply looking for historical and sociological explanations for their existence would not be sufficient if we were to truly understand how these parties organised, behaved and constructed their electoral strategies.

Due to the political pressure exerted by SNRPs, sub-state governance institutions began to spring up around Europe. SNRPs were thus presented with an opportunity that was often previously denied to them: the opportunity to hold political office. In the case of Plaid Cymru and the SNP, this opportunity came in the form of devolution to Wales and Scotland in 1999. Previously, these two parties had been consigned to winning as many votes as the

could at UK General Elections, perhaps picking up the odd by-election victory, and putting pressure on the UK-wide parties. Both parties' organisational profiles prior to devolution were highly decentralised, relying heavily on local branch activity. Although professionalisation did occur to a degree, with Plaid Cymru being ahead of the SNP in this regard by the time 1999 came about, their organisational profiles were very much 'amateur activist' in nature.

Literature on SNRPs suggests that, rather than being 'different' because of their objectives, they actually behave in broadly similar ways to other party types when in government and face the same dilemmas associated with governmental office. So, if these parties are, broadly speaking, 'normal' in the sense that they are like other mainstream parties, does this assumption apply to their organisational structures too?

Analysis of the organisational development of Plaid Cymru and the SNP suggests that this is indeed very much the case. Organisational reforms undertaken in both parties, although particular to each party for particular reasons, were broadly similar in the sense that they shifted more power into the hands of party elites who are supported by a more empowered party HQ. Despite these similarities, the triggers for organisational reform were different and reflect politics, tensions and contextual factors unique to each party.

In the case of the SNP, a relatively poor Scottish election in 2003 provided the party's leadership with legitimate opportunity to overhaul the party's internal structures. The way that parliamentary candidates and the party's leadership were elected was the most important element of these reforms. In the run-up to the 2003 election, internal strife over how candidates were selected for the party's regional list erupted and made headlines in the Scottish press. Essentially, to get a place high on the list, candidates had to ensure their popularity with a number of key branch activists. This system led to senior party figures like Margo MacDonald, Mike Russell and Andrew Wilson being placed so far down the list that it meant very little chance of election and thus effective deselection.

After the 2003 election, the party began a period of internal reform in order to professionalise the party's policy making and administrative capacities, but also to bring in One-Member-One-Vote (OMOV) to elect list candidates and the party's leadership. In terms of leadership, the post of Party Convenor was resigned to history and the post of Party Leader was created. Other aspects of the SNP's internal mechanics were substantially reformed to make the party more professionalised, streamlined, and more ready to be a party of government if and when the opportunity came about. The changes to the party's constitution were voted through in a special conference in 2004, and are widely praised within the SNP as being an important aspect of the party's electoral success in 2007. John Swinney, the SNP's leader through this period, is widely revered by the party's MSP group for the changes he made to the party at this time.

Plaid Cymru had a very good Welsh election in 1999, but then began a period of electoral drift under the leadership of Ieuan Wyn Jones who took over from the more charismatic Dafydd Wigley in 2000. Between the 2003 and 2007 Welsh elections, a significant divide over strategy opened up in the party over whether or not Plaid Cymru purpose was to contest elections in order to win governmental office, or whether it was more of a pressure group which existed to campaign on a range cultural and nation building issues. This led to two important leadership positions being split between two individuals who each advocated one of these positions. In spite of this, the 2007 Welsh election, the result had left Plaid Cymru in the position where it was essentially the kingmaker and the party eventually decided to go into government with Labour as a minority coalition partner.

Plaid Cymru gained significant policy concessions in government, but it suffered from organisational weaknesses and ineffective leadership in the run-up to the 2011 election and suffered its Welsh election result to date. This opened up the space for a period of organisational reform which was driven, largely, by elites who were more convinced of Plaid Cymru's place in Welsh politics as a political party that should seek governmental office. Like the SNP, the organisational reforms that were put into effect were designed to remove influence from some key activists. For example, a number of elites pointed to party conference, where only branch delegates could vote on policy, as a forum where 'hardcore' activists could hijack the agenda and encourage unfavourable media coverage as a result. The solution was to open up motions at party conference to OMOV to prevent this happening. Other changes involved shifting strategic decision making away from local branches upwards to constituency committees, and reducing the influence of the party's National Executive Committee over party strategy.

In both cases, windows of opportunity for party elites opened up after electoral disappointment, and in both cases reforms entailed professionalisation and centralisation of decision-making, strategic and administrative functions. The key difference between the two parties is that the SNP reformed its organisation in advance of it entering government, whilst Plaid Cymru did it afterwards. This can partly be explained by the lack of an existential debate within the SNP about its purpose in Scottish politics and thus a clearer sense of how to best achieve its goals. However, in both cases the creation of devolved institutions added a new strategic incentive which did not previously exist: governmental office. Even though Plaid Cymru reformed after being in government, the changes that they did make would theoretically make them more effective in the same position next time around. Therefore, it is clear to see that sub-state governance structures have encouraged these two parties to become more 'normal' in organisational terms, and the changes they underwent are typical with regards to other party types. More research is required in order to assess whether these patterns are typical of SNRPs more generally.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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