

# The Welsh Assembly after the elections: housing policy could be an area upon which to build a coalition

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5/3/2016

*With the Welsh elections now only days away, the race to the National Assembly is entering its closing stages, writes **Steffan Evans**. With [opinion polls](#) continuing to suggest that no one party will gain sufficient votes to hold a majority in the Senedd, attention is sure to turn to potential coalitions after May the 5<sup>th</sup>.*



If recent polls are correct there appear to be three realistic options for government on the table; a Labour minority Government, a Labour/ Plaid Cymru coalition, and a Labour/ Liberal Democrat coalition. The potential challenges for any of these options are immediately apparent. Will Labour be able to effectively govern as a minority? Will the, at times, [strained relationship](#) between Labour and Plaid Cymru mean that they are reluctant to work in partnership? And will the Liberal Democrats manage to get enough members elected to ensure that a Labour/ Liberal Democrat coalition makes mathematical sense?

Whatever the answer to these questions it appears certain that the Labour party is going to have to work with at least one, if not both Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats over the life of the next Assembly. Coming to an agreement over some policy issues may well present difficulties for Labour. For example, the Labour, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrat [manifestos](#) contain very different policies on higher education funding. In other areas however, the parties seem to have a great deal in common. One such area is housing policy.

Housing is a policy issue that features prominently in the manifestos of every Welsh political party ahead of the election. As one might expect, the focus of each party's housing policy depends on which side of the political spectrum it lies, with Labour, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats placing far greater emphasis on social and affordable housing than the Conservatives and UKIP. This mutual commitment to social and affordable housing would appear to be an obvious starting point for any negotiations between these three parties.

All three parties pledge to develop more affordable homes. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats pledge that they would build 20,000 affordable homes over the course of the next Assembly in their manifestos, whilst Plaid Cymru pledge that they will construct a new generation of public housing. The manifestos of all three parties also contain pledges to reduce the number of empty properties, bringing these back into the housing stock. Such pledges, whilst likely to be welcomed by those working in the social housing sector and by those left stuck on social housing waiting registers, are unlikely to attract broader media headlines during the first few months of a coalition government. The Labour and Plaid Cymru manifestos however do contain a policy that might draw such attention, the abolition of the "right to buy".

Whilst in coalition between 2007 and 2011, Labour and Plaid Cymru enacted the Housing (Wales) Measure, a piece of legislation that gave the Welsh Ministers the ability to suspend the "right to buy" in individual local authorities in Wales. Both parties' manifestos this time contain a pledge to go one step further and to abolish the policy completely. Such a policy could be the centrepiece of any Plaid/ Labour coalition agreement.

The historic symbolism of the "right to buy" means that any piece of legislation enacted by a Plaid/ Labour coalition, abolishing it, could well capture the public's attention. This is particularly true given the context in which the legislation would be enacted. Whilst the Scottish Government has already enacted legislation that is set to bring the "right to buy" to an end there, the Conservative Government in Westminster is extending the "right to buy" to housing association properties in England. This could provide the prospective coalition with a platform to distinguish its work from that of the UK Government, a proposition that may prove attractive to both parties. Enacting such a symbolic

piece of legislation early into an Assembly term could also provide a new coalition with a springboard from which it could go on to pursue policies in other areas where agreement may not be as forthcoming.

Despite such examples of where the three parties might be able to cooperate, there are certain aspects of each parties' housing policy where such cooperation might not be as easy to come by. For example, the Plaid Cymru manifesto contains a pledge to ensure that any housing development should consider its impact on the linguistic nature of the area within which the development will take place. No such policy appears in the Labour manifesto. Would Labour be willing to give ground on a policy that is likely to be extremely important to some of Plaid Cymru's membership? The Liberal Democrats' manifesto on the other hand contains a pledge to introduce a "rent to buy" scheme. Given that no such policy appears in the Labour manifesto would they be prepared to invest money into such a scheme?

In the days and weeks following May the 5<sup>th</sup>, such questions will need to be answered. Given that the European Union referendum is set to take place a few weeks after polling day, and the potential areas for disagreements between the parties, forming a coalition might well be a lengthy process. Housing however does seem to be a policy area, upon which such a coalition could be built.

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*To find out more about the 2016 Welsh elections, visit the [Democratic Dashboard](#).*



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### About the Author

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