

After the Brexit vote Plaid Cymru is finally becoming a radical alternative to Labour in Wales

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*There is a future to be had for the Welsh independence movement. Wales' vote in favour of Brexit was not a one in favour of centralising more power in Westminster. At the same time Labour, that has dominated the country political scene, finds its formula of civic Welsh nationalism increasingly untenable. **Samuel Parry** writes that but for the virtual non-existence of independent Welsh media conditions post-Brexit are ripe for the Welsh independence movement to thrive.*



The Welsh Independence Movement has always been rather weak, never building on its 19th-century foundations when a young David Lloyd George became the leader of Cymru Fydd, a pressure group created to advance Welsh culture. With hindsight, Cymru Fydd's obsession with cultural, rather than political autonomy illustrates the historical weakness and lack of ambition shown by Welsh movements in comparison to those of Ireland and Scotland.

England and Wales decided to leave the European Union, this could perhaps be seen as the last nail in the coffin of this fringe movement. After all, Plaid Cymru's [constitution](#) states that they believe in an independent Wales within Europe. Now that membership of the EU has been rejected by the people of Wales, does independence become untenable? Simply, no. In fact, it creates the conditions to make independence for Wales a radical alternative in the face of an increasingly centralised, right-wing Westminster. This is not impossible, [69% of people](#) in Wales believe that the Welsh Government, not Westminster, should have the most say in how Wales is run. This may prove fertile ground for the independence movement.

The reason that the independence movement in Wales has been historically weak is threefold; Labour's incorporation of subaltern narratives, Plaid Cymru's recent meek, reformist policy coupled with their historic obsession with language and culture, and the lack of indigenous Welsh Media.

Since devolution, Labour have positioned themselves as the centre-left soft Welsh nationalist party and have been successful in this approach. Labour's hegemonic position means that those voters who may be generally sympathetic to Plaid's and Leanne Wood's aims continue to vote Labour due to inertia and habitual voting. This explains why Plaid, even with [the most popular leader in Wales](#) continually do worse than Labour. Labour's response to the Plaid Cymru challenge has been twofold; the incorporation of some of the more 'harmless', 'banal' policies and the complete refutation and vicious rejection of others. Labour have incorporated Plaid Cymru policies and discourses where possible, especially Plaid's claim of being the 'Party of Wales'. For example, Welsh Labour's 2016 [manifesto](#) states that they are 'Together for Wales' and that "Welsh Labour is a party of the people, for the people". When a Plaid discourse cannot be situated within a Welsh Labour platform they attack these positions fervently. This is the definition of hegemony; a hegemonic power must remain constantly aware of these counter and alternative narratives, and be able to incorporate them or neutralise them, but when this is not possible, these discourses will be "extirpated with extraordinary vigour". Labour's cooptation of [Welsh language policy](#) is a prime example of the incorporation of subaltern narratives, co-opting Cymdeithas yr Iaith (Welsh Language Society), which has been incredibly [damning of Welsh Labour](#) in the past. This soft nationalist approach has created a 'new' or 'civic' Welsh identity. An identity that is softly nationalist yet ultimately unionist, which, in turn, bolsters Labour hegemony.



The result is that Labour's 'inclusive', 'civic' Welshness is used to disarticulate all rival conceptions of Welshness. Anything that doesn't easily fall within Labour's narrative can be deemed as 'reactionary', 'ethnic' or 'exclusive'. Language concerns and Welsh language activists are posited as 'ethnic' and 'exclusionary' groups versus the 'cosmopolitan', Anglophone, Labourism. This discourse has posited Plaid Cymru as the 'nasty nationalist party' against the soft-nationalist 'inclusive' Labour nationalism. Welsh Labour have striven to present Plaid Cymru as extreme with controversies surrounding the cultural impacts of large-scale in-migration from England into poorer, largely rural and traditionally Welsh-speaking areas being used to associate Plaid Cymru with racism and 'anti-Englishness'. A strong independence movement is impossible when the hegemonic party positions Welsh concerns as insular compared to liberal unionism.

Plaid Cymru policy since the creation of the Assembly has also played a large role in the weakness of the independence movement. Independence has not been on the agenda in any of their manifestos since 1999, and have instead followed a reformist, incremental process. The goal of moving from 'niche' to 'normal' politics has been more important than their long-term aim of independence. Yet, this is idiosyncratic; independence is inherently revolutionary as it is a clear break from the status quo. Attempting to create the conditions for independence within a state that inherently disagrees with the principle [does not work](#). Plaid's reformism is clear in public perceptions, Corbyn's Labour is deemed more 'radical' yet on policy Plaid are easily more left-wing.

So what has changed since the EU referendum?

Firstly, Plaid Cymru have decided to put [independence on the agenda](#) for the first time since the inception of the National Assembly. Two consequences may lead from this change in policy. Firstly, it positions Plaid Cymru (and concurrently independence), as a radical alternative to Labour in Wales. It, therefore, gives the ability to those [voters that stuck two fingers up at Labour](#) a choice. Similarly, many of those that did vote for Brexit in Wales did so because they are disillusioned with the ruling classes, both in Westminster and in Cardiff Bay. A vote in favour of Brexit was not a vote in favour of centralising more power in Westminster. Equally important was the fact that thousands of people defied the wishes of the Labour party in Wales- this is hugely significant. More worryingly for Labour, this vote may prove just how fragile their dominance is; its roots do not go as deep as once thought.

Vast swathes of those who voted to leave the EU are angry with the establishment, and quite rightly. Independence, and Plaid Cymru's new-found support for the principle, at least gives the disillusioned a choice. Secondly, Labour's

discourse of being the 'civic', 'inclusive', form of Welsh nationalism is beginning to come untenable. Firstly, the conception that Welsh speakers (and Plaid Cymru) are reactionary and exclusive was dispelled by the [Referendum results](#). Only five (out of 22) Welsh local authorities voted 'remain'. After Cardiff, Gwynedd and Ceredigion, which are Plaid Cymru voting, Welsh-speaking heartlands had the highest percentage of those voting to remain. The accusations, like those made by [Alun Cairns](#), have become harder to sustain. The language 'issue' in Wales may lessen after the progressivity shown by the Welsh 'heartlands'. The independence movement may become a unifying factor, the foundation for a genuine Welsh identity as Labour's inherent Unionism becomes clearer at the same time that Scotland (and to a lesser extent, Northern Ireland), may vote to leave the UK. It seems like the people of Wales are beginning to evaluate their position within the Union; since the EU referendum the people of Wales were asked if Wales should be an independent country, 15% stated 'yes' (this is about the same level as the past 20 years). When asked to hypothesise that Scotland had left the Union and Wales could re-join the EU if it voted for independence [28% stated they would vote for independence](#). This is still a clear minority, yet it shows that the referendum has at least made a larger proportion of the population conducive to the idea of an independent Welsh nation.

Perhaps the largest hurdle for an independence movement to overcome is the complete lack of indigenous media. England has the issue of *disinformation* whereas Wales has the issue of no information. The news imbibed in Wales is 'British' or 'English' news. Less than 5% of people in Wales regularly read a Welsh newspaper whereas [16% regularly read the Daily Mail](#). This means that the Welsh populace are unaware of what exactly the Assembly does, benefiting the Labour Party in Wales through a lack of oversight. It similarly means that all Welsh media is inherently Unionist, whether it be news from the BBC or The Times; there is no [Scottish Herald](#) in Wales. This creates a wider issue of who 'we' are and what 'our' nation is.

Despite the lack of a Welsh media, the majority of people in Wales still '[feel Welsh](#)', not British (which is remarkable, all things considered) and there is undoubtedly, in the wake of Brexit, an opportunity to create a radical case for Welsh independence. The main issue is *how* the argument for independence will be conveyed to the people. There are no official avenues for these opinions to be raised and discussed, nowhere for an anti-Unionist discourse to be posited, nowhere to raise questions of Welshness and how it is we should express it. This is the main challenge for the Welsh independence movement post-Brexit. If this hurdle is overcome, the Welsh independence movement may be seen as a radical alternative at last.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Brexit blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Photo by [National Assembly for Wales](#): (CC BY 2.0).

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