

The challenge for Plaid Cymru's leadership will be to harness the energy of their membership

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After disappointing results in the 2011 Welsh Election, Plaid Cymru launched an internal review to reflect on their current situation and shape future strategy. [Craig McAngus](#) offers an analysis of the resulting report, *Moving Forward*, as well as its implications for the internal politics of the party and the Welsh political scene more broadly.



Plaid Cymru entered government for the first time in 2007, forming the One Wales Government with Labour in the Welsh assembly. Plaid's primary aim as a party is 'independence for Wales in Europe', and the coalition with Labour was a means of achieving another step in the journey towards this end. That step was the referendum on primary law-making powers which, held in March 2011, showed finally that devolution in Wales is the settled will of the Welsh people, despite a turnout of only 35.4%. More significantly, it signalled the creation the first law-making body in Wales for over 600 years. Despite the 'policy success' that the referendum represents, Plaid failed to achieve 'political success' as they lost 4 Assembly Members in the 2011 Welsh election and achieved their lowest share of the vote in any devolved election so far. Although the party was comforted somewhat by the referendum result, there was deep disappointment at not being able to capitalise in the election just a couple of months later.

Plaid responded to the disappointment of the election with an internal review. In his leadership resignation statement just after the election, Ieuan Wyn Jones said that Plaid 'needs time to reflect on the results, look long and hard at our message, our party structures and campaigning abilities' and that 'we now need to take the party to the next stage of its development, and conduct a thorough review.' This review led to a report, *Moving Forward*, which laid out 296 recommendations ranging from the party's vision and strategy, to organisational structures and party membership. The overall process will end on the 16th of February, with a special conference being held to ratify those recommendations which alter the party's constitution.

This process is interesting to scholars for two reasons. Firstly, there are clear parallels between Plaid and the SNP with regards to the types of changes being proposed and, perhaps more importantly, the reasons for them. The SNP went through an internal reform process back in 2004 and the head of Plaid's review process, Eurfyl Ap Gwilym, did indeed consult with the SNP in autumn 2011. Overall, there appears to be a common trajectory of autonomist party organisational development brought about by the challenges of adapting to devolution. Secondly, the review process is an ongoing example of the shift along the amateur-professional spectrum brought about by both internal and external pressures. The relationship between party elites and party members, particularly those commonly termed 'activists', is a prevalent theme of this process.

In order to assess the review process, it's important to first state what party elites though was 'wrong' with Plaid. This can be boiled down to two closely related broad categories: the ineffectiveness of some of Plaid's organisational structures, and the ability of a segment of the membership to dictate party strategy and policy. On the first, the party's branches, although acknowledged as being important in many respects, are too often boring and uninspiring for members. The party's National Executive Council (NEC) is also accused of not being agile enough to deal with the fast-paced nature of modern politics, given that it meets every 8 weeks and has 32 members. Furthermore, branches have been known to run parallel campaigns alongside those at the constituency level which leads to inefficiency and confusion. Secondly, the party is structured in such a way that those members who are very active in the party are very difficult to control. For example, the party's annual conference described as not used in modern context and the agenda is often dominated by a few branches, who are of course dominated by activists, which leads to constant repetition such as motions on S4C or anti-nuclear policy.

Moving Forward makes some interesting recommendations relating to the criticisms of Plaid's internal structures. On branches, the report recommends that their position as the 'primary level of organisation of the party' be removed and this status be replaced by the Constituency Committee. These committees would take control of political strategy, policy development and elections, amongst others, while the branch is relegated to focussing mainly on fundraising and canvassing. *Moving Forward* also recommends reform of the party's National Executive Committee which, in its current form, 'will not provide the necessary direction and leadership for the 21st century.' Moreover, there is a proposal to create a 'Leadership Team' responsible for 'overseeing the day-to-day political tactics of the Party'. The NEC would become a sub-committee of the Leadership Team,

There are also plenty of recommendations which relate to the party's membership. On the one hand, members are assets to elites in that they knock on doors, gather data on the electorate, pay their monthly fees and provide legitimacy for their party's leadership. On the other hand, members, particularly very active ones, can become liabilities because they tend to be very policy 'pure' and thus are prone to supporting 'vote-losing' strategies. Party organisations where active members have more influence will be thus more likely to display these tendencies. In terms of members as assets, *Moving Forward* makes the recruitment of new members a priority because numbers have decreased over recent years and this hinders the party's ability to 'organise and campaign effectively'.

However, there are proposals which do view members as liabilities. On strategy, it is claimed that the party 'should be focussed on what is really important and not be distracted by side issues'. Furthermore, although elites are criticised for not advocating a 'clearly articulated strategy', members 'will be tempted to fill the vacuum by formulating their own version of policies and this can lead to incoherence and confusion.' On Plaid's annual conference, *Moving Forward* suggests changing this system by allowing every member attending conference to vote rather than just delegates, the logic being that the more 'ordinary' members mirror the views of the leadership and the electorate more closely than delegates.

In 2004, the SNP went through similar reforms. Although not a mirror image, those reforms were designed to curb the influence of powerful activists who were perceived to be damaging the party. The 2003 Scottish election, a disappointing one for the SNP, gave reformers a legitimate platform to make some important changes, the most important one being the adoption of One-Member-One-Vote for the selection of candidates which neutralised the influence of activists. Interestingly, these changes came about before the SNP experienced government. Indeed, John Swinney (previously party leader) stated in 2003 that the SNP had to change in order to become a party of government.

The leadership of a political party generally gets its way, and so it is likely that Plaid's special conference will push through the proposed changes. The process, as argued above, needs to be seen as a wider process of political party adaptation to ever-changing political environments. For Plaid, and the SNP previously, internal reforms of this type are part of the process of moving from 'protest to power'. The challenge for Plaid's leadership going forward will be to legitimately harness the energy of their membership direct it in the direction of greater electoral prosperity for the party. Whether this particular reform process will do that remains to be seen.

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