Diversity in the United Kingdom

Understanding Minority Nationalisms

Andrew Harvey, Executive Officer, Australian Council of Deans of Education, c/o RMIT University, Australia

Abstract

This paper examines the complexity of national identity in the United Kingdom. Despite frequent understatement, the British state is characterized by an extraordinary diversity of nationalism. In the twenty-first century, this diversity is increasingly visible. State-building British nationalism competes with parochial minority nationalism in Northern Ireland, and with a nationalism in Wales which has been described as paradoxically anti-nationalist. Yet, at the start of the twenty-first century, remarkably little is still known of the nationalisms within the United Kingdom.

The nationhood of Scotland has been tacitly acknowledged in a Scottish Parliament, though it remains tied politically to the British state. Wales continues to be treated as a region rather than a nation after the establishment of a minimalist Welsh Assembly. Few claim, as Margaret Thatcher once did, that Northern Ireland is as ‘British as Finchley’, but its political institutions remain beholden to Westminster, with or without an Assembly. All three regions have different levels of autonomy. In each, the interests of minority nationalists have traditionally been considered only in so far as they affect the British state. The paper argues that Anglocentrism has hindered a deeper understanding of the minority nationalisms, and of their significance within a European context. Particular reference will be made to the case of Wales.

Keywords: Diversity, Nationalism, Identity, United Kingdom, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland

This paper examines the phenomenon of minority nationalism and its complex relationship to diversity. Within the United Kingdom, distinct nationalist movements exist within Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, each seeking greater autonomy for its region. How these movements seek to represent collective identities changes over time and according to political context. However, minority nationalism is characterised by two key dilemmas. The movement must represent diverse identities while maintaining a united front against a dominant host state; and it must determine the efficacy of working within the parameters of the dominant host state as against seeking influence outside of those parameters. The case study of Wales is used in this paper to delineate these dilemmas, and to highlight possible ways forward for minority nationalists in the twenty-first century. The paper argues that minority nationalism does not inevitably work against diversity, and that the most effective nationalist movements are able to harness difference and negotiate concentric circles of identity.

Evidence of the complexity of identity in the United Kingdom is found in the political composition of the state. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the United Kingdom perhaps resembles a union state more than a unitary one. The nationhood of Scotland has been tacitly acknowledged in a Scottish Parliament, though it remains a nation tied politically to the British state. Wales, as Bogdanor has acknowledged, continues to be treated as a region rather than a nation after the establishment of a minimalist Welsh Assembly (1999: 255). Few claim, as Margaret Thatcher once did, that Northern Ireland is as ‘British as Finchley’, but its political institutions are also beholden to the Westminster Parliament despite the fragile existence of a Northern Ireland Assembly. In each case, a different level of autonomy exists, while all three regions remain subject to the ultimate sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament.

The reasons for this political asymmetry relate both to historical development and to the question of identity. Insights into both these questions can be found by examining minority nationalism, defined here as a movement in which the national identity of a minority group is asserted within a dominant host state, in this case the UK. Minority nationalism has been central to the processes of historical development, to the building of regional identity and, ultimately, to the establishment of limited forms of political autonomy in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the work of minority nationalists, which in each region

1 Citing Rokkan and Urwin, James Mitchell argues that the UK is increasingly appreciated as a union state, in the sense that some areas of pre-union rights and regional institutional structures survived the union, most notably in Scotland (1998: 122-3). Administrative standardisation was not absolute, though Wales was arguably subject to near total domination, and the parliamentary sovereignty of Westminster has always been plenary in principle (Kearney 1997: 10).
is perceived as unfinished, has been complicated and often obstructed by a number of challenges. In particular, the question of legitimacy has arguably plagued minority nationalism to a greater extent than the state-building nationalism of the United Kingdom.

Quite simply, minority nationalists have faced constant pressure to defend their nationalist techniques, and to legitimate their claims to political autonomy, usually against a hostile British state. The British state has more often tried to inveigle rather than force its minority nations to accept a British identity, as evidenced in the increasing administrative powers devolved to each region throughout the twentieth century. Nevertheless, nationalists in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have needed to argue consistently both that these regions are properly national entities, and that the natural corollary of this finding is a level of political autonomy reflective of nationhood. Advocates of the British state, of course, can, and do, argue that even if the acceptance of minority nations is granted, the superiority of the British civic form of government must be acknowledged ( Kearney 1997: 11).

The supreme challenge for minority nationalists, then, is to demonstrate that they represent more than the creations of nationalist élites, and more than populist vehicles of political dissent. In the twenty-first century, they are assisted in this cause by the forces of globalisation, and the evolving institutions of the European Union (EU), which suggest that political autonomy may be uncoupled from its traditional raiment of sovereignty. The concept of Welsh Europeans, for example, on which John Osmond (1995) draws, involves acknowledgement of the limitations of national autonomy, yet also an assertion that minority nationalism in the twenty-first century may help foster the very qualities of diversity and tolerance that it is so often accused of undermining. If the reality of overlapping identities can be recognised, then escape from identity politics becomes imaginable. Ignatieff has defined identity politics as ‘the obsessional elaboration of an identity distinguishably one’s own, safe from contamination or impingement by other races, religions, genders or nationalities’ (2000: 247). This paper adopts his definition, noting also that identity politics are usually oppositional, in that the elaboration of such a distinct identity frequently requires recourse to its antithesis. Escaping from identity politics, then, is critical in allowing minority nationalists to demonstrate the full breadth and diversity of their movements.

The case of Wales underlines the challenges of minority nationalism, but also shows its potential fluidity and diversity. Wales itself is a region of paradox. It contains nationalists, but they regularly denounce nationalism (Nairn 1981: 214). In the nineteenth century, the Welsh were predominantly Nonconformists, and were seen as an austere, highly religious people. In the twentieth century, they were obsessed with the apparent antithesis of Nonconformity, rugby. From 1880 to 1930, approximately half the Welsh workforce depended on a single industry, namely coal, a situation possibly unique in the history of industrial Europe ( Davies, J. 1993: 473). By 1990, there were only 4,000 miners in Wales ( Davies, J. 1993: 685). In 1979, the Welsh voted four to one against a proposal for devolved government. Eighteen years later, they endorsed a similar proposal. Perhaps most surprisingly of all, the Welsh language, whose imminent demise has been the one constant prediction of the nearly five centuries since Welsh annexation to England, is flourishing at the same time as English becomes the hegemonic language of globalisation.

Wales has not been invented or reconstructed by nationalist élites, but that the use of mythology, historiography and the language provides fascinating examples of nationalist practices. As with Northern Ireland and Scotland, historical forces have helped shape the parameters of nationalism within Wales. In the Welsh case, the exigencies of history meant that nationalism was, for centuries, faced with the indomitable power of the only Welsh neighbour, England. Prospects for political autonomy were low, and English cultural and political influence consistently threatened to envelope the distinct identity of the Welsh region. It is unsurprising, in this context, that the traditional reaction of Welsh nationalists occurred primarily at a cultural level. Lacking the ability to invoke substantial political change, those concerned with preserving a Welsh nation chose to focus upon its cultural distinction instead. Heavily influenced by mythology and historiography, cultural nationalism necessarily created a form of identity politics, reliant as it was on attacking all things anglocentric. Nevertheless, its existence was crucial to the political nationalism which followed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Welsh political nationalism was, and still is, faced with the same problem as cultural nationalism, namely the dominance of England, but subtle changes to the international relationship occurred throughout the twentieth century in particular. Increasingly, the needs of Wales were seen to be conflicting with the needs of the England-dominated British state. This reached its zenith in the 1997 British general elections, where the Conservative Party which had ruled Wales for the previous eighteen years was unable to win a single Welsh electorate. As the unionist argument within Wales gradually weakened, the opportunities for political nationalists correspondingly grew. However, the story of Welsh nationalism is not one of determinism. The Welsh Assembly, established
after the referendum of 1997, was not the inevitable result of historical forces but relied, amongst other things, on a rejuvenated nationalist movement. Welsh political nationalism for much of the twentieth century was based on identity politics and was openly exclusivist, demanding privileges for the Welsh language, in particular, which were unsupported by the majority of Walians. However, a more inclusive, civic form of nationalism came to prevalence in the late twentieth-century, European in outlook and conscious of the need to win popular support for its proposals.

Beyond this, Welsh nationalists were beginning to reassess the nature of their political position in the twenty-first century. Traditionally, they had been faced with the invidious dilemma of working within the parameters of Westminster, which clearly involved risks of assimilation, or of working outside these parameters, which involved the helplessness of confinement to the Celtic fringe. The rise of Europe, and forces of globalisation, however, have enabled new nationalist thinking to emerge. Both of the traditional alternatives now encompass greater political possibilities. The establishment of a Welsh Assembly highlights that some domestic autonomy is envisageable, indeed exists already, within the parameters of Westminster. The parallel case of Catalonia within Spain underlines the extent of regional identity and autonomy that can be harnessed while not breaking political ties with the dominant state. Alternatively, feasible political existence outside the British state is now also imaginable. The success of the Irish Republic, and of similar smaller states, provides some evidence that political autonomy in the twenty-first century is sustainable despite low population levels. The result is that Welsh nationalists face a familiar political tension, but under radically different, and arguably more promising circumstances. New forms of essentially civic nationalism are now arising to take advantage of the opportunities of Europe and globalisation.

The historical transition of Welsh nationalism can be viewed through a political prism, by comparing the nineteenth-century nationalist political party with its twentieth-century successor. The first political manifestation of nationalism within a Westminster context in Wales involved the formation of Cymru Fydd (Wales to Be). Antecedent to the dominant twentieth-century nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, Cymru Fydd was an explicitly nationalist movement which emerged in Wales in the milieu of the late-nineteenth century. The issue of whether to work within the traditional party structure at Westminster or rather to assert complete independence was a question which surrounded the formation of the party, though either option presented less possibilities than those afforded contemporary nationalists. Nevertheless, broad similarities over time can be drawn: as Wales now points to Ireland as an example of what can be achieved with EU assistance, in the nineteenth century Welsh nationalists also looked to Ireland in terms of disestablishment, the land question and home rule. Until the late-nineteenth century, the connection with Ireland had been marred by the anti-Catholic nature of Welsh society and the influx of Irish famine victims into Wales, who were often perceived as a liability to the nation (Davies, J. 1993: 385). In the 1880s, however, Welsh politics became increasingly nationalist, and it looked to Ireland, to Parnell and to Davitt, for inspiration. Irish disestablishment had spurred on the cause of religious equality in Wales. The Welsh Sunday Closing Act had followed upon a similar measure for Ireland. Welsh higher education was stimulated by the progress of the university movement in Ireland. Above all, the Irish Land Act of 1881, granting free sale of holdings, fixity of tenure and arbitration on rents by a land court, encouraged similar demands in Wales. (Morgan, K. 1980: 69)

Gladstone, the dominant political figure of British politics at this time, was notoriously ambiguous about Wales but deeply concerned to achieve home rule in Ireland as his lasting legacy (Biagini 2000: 90-113). Nevertheless, these years saw much debate about the specificity of Welsh problems and witnessed a growing realisation that the needs of Wales and England were not always identical. Disestablishment, particularly, revealed an area in which Wales appeared to be quite distinct from England. Given the Nonconformist majority within Wales, Welsh nationalists were hostile to the continuing institutional dominance of the Anglican Church and many, including Gladstone, began to acknowledge that Wales might have separate needs from its oversized neighbour: ‘Where there is a distinctly formed Welsh opinion on a given subject, which affects Wales alone…I know of no reason why a respectful regard should not be paid to that opinion’ (quoted in Morgan, K. 1980: 42). Though many parliamentarians, including the inconsistent Gladstone, at times denied the existence of uniquely Welsh problems, events increasingly revealed Welsh distinction. The Reform and Redistribution Acts of 1884-5 transformed Wales into a more democratic polity, and the near trebling of the electorate led to a Liberal dominance that would continue for over three decades, raising the profile of politics within the nation. Predictably, attempts to harness this growing Welsh consciousness were expressed in a new nationalist movement.

Often equated with prominent Welsh statesman, David Lloyd George, Cymru Fydd was formed in 1885 and firmly raised the dilemma of whether to concentrate on the ruling Liberal Party at Westminster or seek change outside of that power structure. Indeed, Cymru Fydd posed many
questions from its inception (Jenkins, P. 1992: 335). From the outset, the policies and ambit of the movement were vague: Liberal MP and first President of Cymru Fydd, Tom Ellis, expounded a vision of ‘organic’ Wales, where nationality included politics, history, art and literature, but the focus of the group was unclear (Davies, J. 1993: 454). Cymru Fydd ‘conceived its national mission in terms of a native cultural and linguistic tradition’, and was heavily influenced by the intelligentsia (Morgan 1980: 104). It was first formed in London by Welsh emigrés, but quickly spread throughout Wales, aided by the support of the popular press (Morgan 1980: 105). While politically explicit goals were hard to locate, Cymru Fydd was inevitably associated with ‘the cry, faint but seductive, of “Welsh home rule”’ which emerged in the late nineteenth century (Morgan 1980: 104). Welsh MPs were themselves unsure whether to engage specifically Welsh issues, or to treat Welsh problems as problems within Britain or Europe, and also whether nationalism was more important than Liberalism, the dominant Welsh electoral force for decades to come. As with Sinn Féin, the movement had to ask itself if entering the Westminster system was treasonous in itself, but abstentionism never became the powerfully divisive issue that it was for Sinn Féin, largely because Cymru Fydd never became as divisively powerful. When the Welsh revolt finally did arrive, it consisted of only four members (Davies, J. 1993: 464). Compared with its Irish counterpart, the break was bathetic.

When Cymru Fydd was formed, there was little illusion of political separation. Indeed, after the 1886 election, following the defeat of Gladstone’s Irish Home Rule Bill and the overwhelming endorsement of a Conservative government under Salisbury, even Irish nationalists focussed once more upon the Liberal Party, and leading Welsh nationalists similarly saw their future bound with that of the Liberal Party in England. As Kenneth Morgan has argued, ‘In Wales there was a profusion of Isaac Butts, but very few Parnells’ (1980: 104). The radicalism and obstructionist tactics of Parnell were largely absent from the Welsh theatre of politics. Instead, Wales exhibited the traditional reluctance to embrace bold nationalism which signatured the its politics over the next century, preferring to extract concessions from London.

This tension was best personified in Tom Ellis. A radical member of the original Cymru Fydd, Ellis was touted as a potential ‘Parnell of Wales’ and was especially prominent in the debates over land during the mid 1880s (Morgan, K. 1980: 95-6). In 1892, however, when Gladstone was once again returned to government, he offered Ellis the position of Junior Lord of the Treasury and Deputy Whip. After much consideration, Ellis accepted the position on the grounds that he could be of more use to Wales in that capacity rather than being completely independent and ignored by the central decision-makers (Davies J. 1993: 460). Accusations naturally followed quickly (Jones, G. 1984: 249), and the name of Ellis threatened to become sandwiched between Lundy and Quisling in the list of modern day traitors.

Nonetheless, Ellis was largely responsible for the establishment of a much-vaunted Land Commission which was appointed in 1893, largely to deal with the concerns of tenants in rural Wales regarding rent, compensation and tenure (Davies J. 1993: 462). The Commission findings included the call for a land court to be established to determine such matters, but were largely nullified by the election result of 1896, which returned the Conservatives to power (Davies J. 1993: 462). Nevertheless, some commentators have argued that ‘no episode demonstrates more the wisdom of his decision to assume office’ (Morgan, K. 1980: 126). Arguing that subtle diplomatic pressure was more efficacious than bellicosity, Gareth Jones has concurred that Ellis ‘wielded far more influence on behalf of Wales in government than he would have done outside it’ (1984: 249).

The dominant nationalism in late-nineteenth century Wales was not focussed around independence for Wales. Rather, it confirmed the observation of Keating that ‘Nationalist claims must be historically situated…contrary to much writing on the subject, nationalist claims are negotiable and have historically been negotiated, managed and compromised’ (1996: 20). Given the implausibility of an independent Wales, most nationalists historically in the region sought lesser goals such as home rule, or greater administrative and cultural autonomy. Such claims have been criticised both by later nationalists, and by unionists wishing to play down the strength of national sentiment within Wales. Some evidence of this latter belief was particularly evident in the aftermath of the 1979 devolution referendum. However, the apparent political weakness of nineteenth-century Welsh nationalism must be seen in the historical context of a weak region in a strong host state.

By contrast, Plaid Cymru was formed in 1925. Its mode of operation was directly influenced by the perceived failure of Cymru Fydd and similar nationalist attempts to seek influence through the channels of Westminster (Davies, J. 1993: 548). Consequently, the platform of Plaid Cymru was to achieve a Welsh-speaking Wales, and Welsh was to be the only medium of party activity (Davies, J. 1993: 548). These were provisions specifically encouraged by Saunders Lewis, who campaigned strongly for exclusivity of the Welsh language at all official levels (Osmond 1985: 225). At the formation of the party, such a program must have
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appeared narrow - in the years following, given the decrease in Welsh-speakers as a percentage of the electorate since 1925, it represented an electoral straitjacket. Despite the party officially adopting bilingualism in 1968 (Bogdanor 1999: 154), language fears persisted, doubtless contributing to the rout of 1979, where many anglophones were wary of possible dominance by a Welsh speaking minority. This was exacerbated by the fact that Plaid Cymru largely took over the role of selling devolution in the absence of Labour enthusiasm.

By the 1990s, the party had arguably matured. Plaid Cymru broadened its base of support, as evidenced by its second place in the European elections of 1994, where it received over 17 per cent of the vote (Osmond 1995: 16), and the elections to the inaugural Welsh Assembly, where it received over 28 per cent of the vote (Economist 15 May 1999, ‘Wales- A cloudy dawn’, p. 63). Statements from the party began to maintain that it ‘recognises that Wales is a bilingual country and recognises the English and Welsh languages fully and equally as languages of communication within the Party and within Wales’ (Plaid Cymru 1997), a platform far from the rhetoric of Saunders Lewis in the 1920s. Beneath the change was recognition that the party had to assuage the fears of English speakers in the 1970s and 80s, particularly given demographic changes over the century.

However, the party did not completely concede the value of working through Westminster. Indeed, commitment to independence and denial of Westminster legitimacy continues. Plaid Cymru openly declares itself to be the party of Wales rather than the party for Wales, signalling its orientation towards fighting for an independent Wales within Europe rather than seeking strength within the confines of Westminster (Plaid Cymru 1997). Whatever the overall goal of contemporary nationalism, it is informed by the possibilities outlined by Keating in Chapter 1. The expansion of political space has enabled ‘a rediscovery and modernization of historic identities’ (Keating 1996: 218) in Wales, free from the identity politics which historically plagued Welsh nationalists trapped in a dominant host state.

The experience of Wales highlights that minority nationalist movements are negotiated over time, and need not rely on fixed notions of identity. Indeed, as the EU broadens and deepens, and as globalization entails a rethinking of sovereignty, there is a new space within which minority nationalism can operate. That political space involves recognition of overlapping identities, and acknowledgement of the limitation of nationalist aspirations. However, contemporary conditions are conducive to nationalist movements which display imagination, sensitivity, and a desire to harness diversity to their cause.

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About the Author

Andrew Harvey is Executive Officer of the Australian Council of Deans of Education. His PhD was on minority nationalism in the United Kingdom, and his interests extend to social theory, British history and comparative international education perspectives.