

# Yes Cymru: the debate on Welsh independence has begun for good

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*The tectonic plates under the United Kingdom are moving: a second Independence Referendum for Scotland is coming and calls from both sides of the Irish border for a reunification referendum have been made. In Wales, the dragon is ever-so-slowly beginning to wake from its slumber, writes **Samuel Parry**.*



In a [previous post](#), I stated that Plaid Cymru was finally becoming a radical alternative to labour in Wales, due to its new found support for the idea of Welsh independence. I was mostly wrong on this issue. Plaid are unsure what their primary ideological goal is. Leanne Wood has been clear on the matter, [commenting](#) “It should be up to people in Wales to decide what happens in Wales. I believe in self-determination”. Many of her colleagues have been rather uninspiring, toeing around the difficult questions and showing their pragmatic/conservative constitutional nature. Simon Thomas AM on [BBCRadio Wales](#) said that he “and the party are political pragmatists” but accepted that Wales could be a successful independent nation. Adam Price AM wrote about [why independence is not an idle fantasy](#), yet stated we needed an “ante-chamber” or “dominion status” pre-independence. These are not anti-independence stances, but if independence is the overarching aim, it is [naïvely optimistic](#) to expect that the conditions for independence will just come into being without a concerted effort by Plaid.

Plaid’s trajectory over the last decades supports the theory that political parties are conservative organisations. Parties seldom lead radical change but react to external shocks. The reverberations of these shocks (IndyRef2, Irish unity, Welsh independence movements) are beginning to be felt in Wales and the party is reactive rather than proactive. It is clear that there are still conservative elements within the party in the mould of Dafydd Elis-Thomas; cultural nationalists with no real appetite for revolutionary constitutional change.

## A blessing in disguise?

Plaid’s behaviour has allowed debates surrounding the issue of independence to be discussed in the public sphere on a non-partisan, non-party political platform. Independence can now be viewed as an issue for all of Wales, not just for those within, or supportive of, Plaid Cymru. Labour is the largest political party in Wales and the majority of the “capillaries of power” in Wales will continue to be dominated by a Labourite mind-set.

Although the higher echelons of this Welsh behemoth are still staunchly Unionist, some elements within the ground force are beginning to at least consider the possibility of an Independent Wales. Since the EU Referendum, a [Welsh Labour group in favour of independence has formed](#). Another noteworthy contribution is that of Huw Williams and his [article](#) on the Welsh language.

## Other media outlets

As previously discussed, the major stumbling block for Welsh Independence is the [absence of an indigenous media](#). ‘Traditional’ media platforms such as the print media and the BBC are still British in nature and staunchly Unionist. There has however been a groundswell of indigenous, independent media outlets since the EU Referendum. [Desolation Radio](#), a weekly political podcast asks the difficult questions in Wales; why are we poor, why did we vote for Brexit, why are UKIP strong in Wales. This is done from a non-party political, anti-establishment, anarchist position. A new website called ‘[nation.cymru](#)’ has crowdfunded over £4,000 in 2 months to create a media outlet that deals with Welsh issues, in Wales, through a Welsh lens.

One group has become almost synonymous with the Welsh independence movement: [Yes Cymru](#). Yes Cymru is a

non-partisan movement that advocates Welsh Independence. The group uses a decentralised approach to the question of independence; Wales is a nation of towns and villages and each town will have its own reason for supporting independence. The fact that Plaid Cymru have been rather timid in their approach has meant that groups such as Yes Cymru can set the parameters of the debate. It has meant that the Welsh independence movement has morphed into something much more than purely arguing for the keys to Wales' own national resources; it's about changing the very nature of our society. Current economic orthodoxy is leading to the destruction of the planet and has not lead to any tangible benefits for people in Wales. The movement has based much of its work on asking the people of Wales what kind of society they would like to live in, and showing how independence can be a means to that society. Independence is no longer seen as an end in itself, but as a way of [transforming Welsh society](#).



Image by [Yes Cymru](#)

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### The same as Scotland?

Due to the nature of the question at hand, the Welsh independence movement will always be compared to that of Scotland's. Yet the social, historical and economic possibilities and issues are vastly different in both nations. Every Marxist worth his salt knows that you cannot simply transport an independence movement or revolution from one country to another. The form the movement must take is grounded in the very real socio-economic conditions of that country. Scotland is a relatively wealthy nation, Wales, on the other hand, is the poorest nation in Western Europe and cannot rely on the same economic arguments as Scotland.

Due to Wales' economic position, the independence movement has changed the political and economic parameters of the debate. Instead of trying to argue how Wales would 'survive' economically after independence, it instead asks Unionists why staying within the Union is beneficial, even though it has not led to any significant improvement in [living conditions](#). The Yes Cymru argument is not that Wales is poor *in spite* of the Union, Wales is poor, partly *due* to the Union. The Unionist economic argument is the same as that espoused during the EU referendum. As we now know, this argument was not enough to galvanise the 'Yes' vote in that referendum. If pro-EU Unionists do not learn from their mistakes, there is a genuine threat that an independence referendum may also go against them.

### Have these developments changed Welsh politics?

The developments outlined have led to a real change in the Welsh political arena. Jason Mohammad, a BBC Radio Wales presenter (a Unionist) held a [radio discussion](#) on a Welsh independence referendum. The show ended with this statement: "I've chaired many debates about Welsh Independence. I can't remember a time when so many people have said the time has come for a conversation about a Welsh independence referendum". Labour politicians, such as First Minister Carwyn Jones and Eluned Morgan AM are being asked about their opinion of an independent Wales. This may not sound remarkable, but Labour politicians being asked about their opinion on the

matter is a huge political shift in itself. I argued in an [earlier article](#) that “Labour have positioned themselves as the centre-left soft Welsh nationalist party” but if a strong independence movement began to emerge, Labour’s soft-nationalist skin would begin to peel, showing its hardened, latent Unionism.

This hard Unionism is beginning to show; Eluned Morgan AM was recently asked about Welsh independence and said that this “[stupid dreaming](#)” must come to an end as Wales is not an economically viable independent nation. Yet for those supportive of Welsh independence these comments are fuel to the flames; why is Wales poor? If the Union leads to prosperity, why is Wales the [poorest nation](#) in Western Europe? If the Union is not to blame, does it mean that Welsh Labour are to blame? There are no easy answers left for Unionists; Welsh Labour feel that the [UK government does not listen to them](#), yet they will still defend the Union tooth and nail.

Another example is that of Owen Smith, Labour MP for Pontypridd who recently [tweeted](#): “Is anyone in the Conservative & Unionist Party bothered that Brexit may lead to a United Ireland & an Independent Scotland?”. Not only does this position Labour on the side of the Conservatives it shows the “Union at all costs” mentality that grips the upper echelons of the party. This echoes the beginning of Labour’s slide in Scotland; to begin there was no tension between feeling Scottish and Unionist and to some there is still no tension. Yet the rise of the SNP made it much harder for Scottish Labour to walk the tightrope of being softly nationalist and simultaneously Unionist. In Scotland, it seems that the axis of the political spectrum is both left-right and nationalist-unionist. The left-nationalist political space has been filled by the SNP, the right-unionist space by the Conservatives, with not many voters fitting into the left-unionist political space of Scottish Labour. If Wales’ political space was to change on the same axis, the same difficulties could be posed for Welsh Labour.

The UK has irrevocably changed. Scotland may become independent. Theresa May has all but ensured that this is the case [by not accepting](#) Sturgeon’s call for a second independence referendum. 56 out of Scotland’s 59 MPs and 69 of Scotland’s 129 MSPs support another referendum. It seems untenable that the PM can choose not to listen to the Scottish will on the issue. Welsh labour do not want Scotland to leave, but have no contingency plan if they do. England already accounts for 85% of the UK’s population, if Scotland leaves, where would this leave Wales? In a recent [Opinion Poll](#), the people of Wales were asked whether they thought Scotland leaving the UK would make Welsh independence more likely in the future. 49% of respondents thought that this would make independence more likely, with 29% saying it wouldn’t. This shows that the people of Wales are beginning to question whether their future lies within or outside the UK. Wales has a very big decision to make. The debate has begun.

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Brexit blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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