

GOING INTO THE WELSH LIBERAL DEMOCRAT C



The Cook-Maclennan Agreement reached between Labour and the Liberal Democrats before the 1997 election included a commitment to establish directly elected parliaments in Wales and Scotland. After a closely-fight referendum campaign in 1997, the Welsh Assembly came into being in 1999.

Unlike in Scotland, the Labour Party in Wales was hostile to a coalition, and initially tried to govern alone – only to enter coalition with the Welsh Liberal Democrats from 2000 to 2003. **Russell Deacon** tells the story, and reflects on the experience of working with the Labour Party.

TO LABOUR

COALITION EXPERIENCE 2000–2003

PRIOR TO THE Welsh Lab–Lib coalition in 2001, the Welsh Liberal Democrats – like the Liberal Democrats across the UK – had little experience of government. Welsh Lords Geraint Howells and Emlyn Hooson had been closely involved with the 1970s Westminster Lib–Lab pact but that had ended over two decades before and both politicians were now of advancing years in the Lords and quite distant from the day-to-day politics of Wales.

Of the six newly elected Liberal Democrat Assembly Members (AMs), none had parliamentary experience, although five had local council experience¹ (Kirsty Williams being the exception with no previous elected experience outside of the party). Michael German had the most experience, being a former deputy leader of Cardiff City Council in a Lab–Lib coalition in the 1980s.

On 27 May 1999 Queen Elizabeth II officially opened the Welsh Assembly. In the run up to the Assembly elections, the Welsh Liberal Democrats had talked publicly about gaining ten seats out of sixty; privately they believed would get eight; they ended up with six. The electorate did not, in fact, give a majority to any one party, let alone the Welsh Liberal Democrats,² leaving the Assembly in a position of no overall control. The numbers were twenty-eight Labour AMs, seventeen Plaid Cymru AMs, nine Conservative AMs and six Welsh Liberal Democrat AMs – with

Left: the Welsh Assembly in session

Labour just three AMs short of a majority. To an astute observer of British politics, it would have seemed obvious that a coalition would therefore be the inevitable result. This was what had happened in the Scottish Parliament, in most local councils and also at Westminster in the past and would happen again in the future. It was expected to be the case in 1999 by both national party leaders, Tony Blair and Paddy Ashdown.³

The reality in Wales was that Labour did not want a coalition, even though it did not have a majority of Assembly seats. The concept of a coalition government was quite alien to its nature because, unlike in Scotland, the Labour Party had held the majority of Welsh parliamentary seats since 1922. In the 1997 general election they had secured 85 per cent of the Welsh representation; the Welsh Liberal Democrats, in contrast, had secured a mere 5 per cent. Although Labour had only gained 47 per cent of the seats at the 1999 Welsh Assembly elections, this sense of dominating Welsh politics remained strong within the Labour Party. As proof of this, Labour's First Secretary at the Assembly, Alun Michael, had chosen his Assembly Cabinet as soon as the election results were known. So despite Ashdown's anger over what he saw as Blair's squandering of the chance to 'play out the project on another stage',⁴ the Welsh Assembly Executive did not contain any Liberal Democrats. Thus, for

the time being, the Welsh Liberal Democrats were able to settle into opposition without the rigours of ministerial office and government responsibility.

The road to forming a Lab–Lib coalition

For reasons of both geography and population, the Welsh political world is much smaller than that of England. Most people, however, have no idea quite how small the Welsh political world can be on occasions. This is an important point when it comes to understanding Welsh elections and coalitions. Prior to the Assembly elections both Michael German and Jenny Randerson were linked closely to the Cardiff Central constituency, as both had gained their political experience within that constituency as Cardiff City councillors. They had both been group leaders on the city council and both had worked closely with future Labour members of the Assembly Cabinet whilst on the council (Rhodri Morgan, Alun Michael and Sue Essex). German, Randerson and Peter Black had also worked closely with Andrew Davies (the Assembly's Labour Business Manager) during the 'Yes for Wales' referendum campaign. As a result, the senior Liberal Democrat AMs had extensive experience of working not simply with Labour but also with the very individuals who were now sitting in the Welsh Assembly Cabinet.

After a short while, the Welsh Liberal Democrats settled down in the Assembly and began to assert themselves within the Welsh party, moving its centre of gravity away from the mid-Wales Liberal parliamentary dominance of the previous half a century, towards other parts of Wales. This power shift did not take place without some resistance from the mid-Wales MPs, and communication between the Assembly Members and the Welsh Lib Dem MPs and Lords was, for a while, quite strained with neither side consulting the other about their plans or strategies.⁵ Whilst these internal squabbles were taking place, upon the horizon arose the increasingly important issue known simply as ‘Objective 1’, which would come to dominate Welsh politics and lead to an eventual coalition.

The background to ‘Objective 1’

In 1999 the West Wales and the Valleys region qualified for Objective 1 European Funding as its GDP was less than 75 per cent of the EU average. Some £1.2 billion was made available to be drawn from EU structural funds, however around a further £860 million needed to be contributed from British public finances in order to secure this funding. The consequence was that the First Minister Alun Michael was unable to guarantee that Wales would get this funding because the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, would not commit the New Labour government to any new spending.⁶

The process of going into coalition

The Welsh Liberal Democrats had set out the mechanisms for going into coalition at their party’s autumn AGM in 1998 in Builth Wells, Powys.⁷ The mechanism was then referred to after that as the ‘Builth Motion’. This required any possible future cooperation with other parties to be recognised as a formal partnership or coalition.

Prior to the Assembly elections, there had been two meetings between Welsh Labour leader Alun Michael and Michael German to discuss ‘what if?’ scenarios. A Labour majority was assumed at this point, but Alun Michael had declared that, in the event of ‘no

overall control’, he would bring everyone on board equally. After the Assembly election, Michael was keen to secure Welsh Liberal Democrat support in the event of a vote of no confidence in him. He did not, however, wish to concede a formal coalition, with real influence for the Liberal Democrats within the Assembly government; and the Lib Dems had little enthusiasm for a partnership on lesser grounds. Alun Michael himself was consequently seen as a major obstacle to the formation of a Lib–Lab coalition and to the future of the Assembly itself, not only by Liberal Democrats but also by many of his own Labour Assembly Members.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats, like the other opposition parties, were not prepared to accept Alun Michael’s assertion that they could trust the Chancellor to deliver the extra funding required in the Comprehensive Spending Review in the summer of 2000. Thus, when an opportunity came for a vote of no confidence in Alun Michael, the party joined the other opposition parties in supporting this vote. Michael was able to resign shortly before the vote was carried out against him, therefore avoiding having to do so afterwards. Prior to this event he had already lost the confidence of his own AMs who declined to renominate him if he resigned, which meant that his old political rival Rhodri Morgan now became the new First Minister and the coalition arrangements were back on the table. The Welsh Assembly Business Manager and Swansea West AM, Andrew Davies, had already privately met Michael German on behalf of the majority of Labour AMs to seek an assurance from him that the Liberal Democrats would not back Alun Michael in a coalition arrangement. This Davies–German meeting helped ensure that the Welsh Liberal Democrats would no longer back Michael, whatever compromises he offered.⁸

With the removal of Michael secured, the Welsh Liberal Democrat leadership expected things to proceed more quickly, but it would be a while before Morgan pushed for a coalition. Having initially rejected Morgan as a Welsh Labour Party leader, Tony Blair was now keen to see Morgan remain in power. In order to

stabilise the situation, the half a billion pounds of ‘matched funding’ needed for Objective 1 were now made available. The Welsh Liberal Democrats had felt they achieved their first victory. They then joined the Labour Party in further secret talks and shortly afterwards produced a draft partnership agreement. It was not until a week before the announcement of this Partnership Agreement that German and Morgan eventually sat in the same room to thrash out the finer points of the deal. The whole process had been so secretive that the two parties felt that they could have walked away at any stage without recriminations.⁹ Reviewing the coalitions in Wales and Scotland in 2004, the academic Ben Seyd felt that the Welsh coalition arrangement had worked out better for both Labour and Liberal Democrats in Wales because it had been worked out over a much longer period than in Scotland.¹⁰ Part of the result of this was that the coalition agreement between the parties in Wales was more than twice the length of that in Scotland despite the fact that Wales had no primary law making powers at this time.

Before the Welsh Liberal Democrats could officially go into coalition they still needed to have a special conference and vote to endorse the coalition. This was duly done in Builth Wells on 14 October 2000. It was here that German was able to convince conference representatives that the Liberal Democrats had got such a good deal in the coalition arrangements, getting some 114 of their policies implemented,¹¹ that when the conference day arrived, members felt unable to resist the coalition and voted for it overwhelmingly. By comparing the Welsh Liberal Democrat Assembly manifesto with the Partnership Agreement, it is easy to see why the special Liberal Democrat conference so comprehensively endorsed the coalition deal.¹² So much of the Lib Dem manifesto had been incorporated that it was, arguably, a Welsh Liberal Democrat programme of government for the next three years rather than a Labour one. The lack of any substantial Labour policies, due in part to interference in the Welsh manifesto from London, allowed Welsh Labour AMs to give the first Welsh government more of the taste of

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Welsh distinctiveness they had desired when they had campaigned for the Welsh Assembly in the referendum two years before. This was reflected in the title of the partnership document signed by both leaders: *Putting Wales First: A Partnership for the People of Wales*.

In order to iron out areas of policy where the two parties were not in agreement, a number of commissions were established. These were:

The Rees Commission on student fees. The Welsh Liberal Democrats were against fees, Welsh Labour for them. Unable to ditch tuition fees because the Assembly lacked primary powers, another way had to be found around this issue.¹³ The result was the introduction of funding to enable Welsh students to avoid paying tuition fees.¹⁴

The Sunderland Commission on local government, which reported back in July 2002 and recommended STV for Welsh council elections. The report was quietly dropped after Labour became the sole party of government at the Welsh Assembly, in May 2003.

The Richard Commission, which examined the future role and function of the Welsh Assembly. The Welsh Liberal Democrats wished to see it recommend a primary law-making and tax-raising legislature. When the Commission reported back in April 2004, it recommended that by the year 2011 or sooner if possible, the Assembly:¹⁵

- 1 should have its delegated powers enhanced;
- 2 should be given primary law-making powers;
- 3 should have its membership increased from sixty to eighty and all members should be elected by STV;
- 4 should be reconstituted with a separate legislature and executive.

The Welsh Labour Party later rejected the third point totally, accepted the fourth, ignored the first and allowed the second only after a further referendum in 2011. This was a major disappointment for the pro-devolution Welsh Liberal Democrats. In hindsight it was also a tactical mistake not to ensure that the Commission's recommendations were accepted in full before

then end of the coalition in May 2003. Nevertheless we should note that there has been some success in persuading the government in Westminster to continue to evolve Welsh devolution through primary law-making and tax-raising powers. The increase in the number of Welsh Assembly Members and the change in the voting system to STV has not been pursued at Westminster. These would benefit the Welsh Liberal Democrats most but have never seemed to appear on the current Westminster coalition's agenda.

The coalition government's success and failure

Out of direct power for six decades, the Welsh Liberals had made virtually no impact on government policy in Wales until they were part of the coalition government. Getting their 1999 Assembly manifesto implemented virtually in full therefore remains the Welsh Liberal Democrats' greatest post-war policy triumph and their only substantial political legacy as a state party. Their role in the 2010 Westminster coalition was, in contrast, limited to just one junior minister at the Wales Office, Baroness Randerson, whose appointment was only made in 2013 some three years after the UK coalition government was formed.

The Welsh coalition had a number of benefits for the Welsh Liberal Democrats, the most important of which was the breaking of the myth that they would never be in a position of power and therefore could promise any policy because they would never have to implement it. The party was able to boost its credibility within Welsh civil and political society, as their previous minor role now became a central one. However, as we noted earlier, it was actual policy implementation that the Welsh Liberal Democrats felt to be their central achievement. Martin Shipton, the *Western Mail's* chief political reporter, noted at the time some of what the Welsh Liberal Democrats felt to be the policy successes of coalition:

Mr German ... is adamant that the six-strong Lib Dem group can legitimately claim credit for the majority of the Assembly Government's most trumpeted successes. Reintroducing student grants, making them

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available for students in further as well as higher education, freezing prescription charges and free prescriptions for the under-25s, free eye tests, class sizes under 26, widening the entitlement to eye tests, free access to national museums, class sizes coming down below 30 for all primary pupils: all of these are claimed by Mr German as specifically Liberal Democrat achievements. To those in the Labour Party who accuse him of exaggerating his party's influence, Mr German asserts that none of the changes listed above appeared in Labour's manifesto.¹⁶

Professor Martin Laffin also undertook a comparative study of the Scottish and Welsh coalitions of this period and concluded that the proportion of purely LD initiatives (... not mentioned in the Labour manifesto) in the Partnership Agreement, was even greater than Scotland.¹⁷ Adding to Shipton's earlier list Laffin noted there were a number of other significant policy achievements on the part of the coalition, which were:¹⁸

- a commitment to an inquiry into student hardship and funding;
- free dental checks for over 55s and under-25s;
- free school milk for infants;
- three weeks' free personal care for the elderly;
- an experimental Welsh Baccalaureate;
- a new farming support package.

Importantly, these policies were in the Welsh Liberal Democrats' manifesto but none of these were in Labour's Welsh manifesto. In order to help ensure that the policies were delivered the Welsh Liberal Democrats had regular Cabinet awaydays to review policy implementation.¹⁹ They were also aware that they had to make sure that the electorate knew who was responsible for each policy in the coalition government. Therefore before the First Minister's second Annual Report in October 2002, Mike German, much to Labour's annoyance, was able to claim that six of the eight leading achievements of the Assembly government that year had come directly from the Liberal Democrat manifesto.²⁰ As none of the policies listed were in the Labour manifesto,

it is unlikely that they would have been achieved by Labour alone within the Assembly. The issue of no tuition fees, later adopted as a central plank of Welsh Labour's 'clear red water' with Westminster, would certainly not have been dealt with as it was, as both the Welsh and UK Labour Parties had accepted this as policy. Labour's short manifesto for this first Assembly had consisted mainly of commitments to invest more in public services and develop new strategies on everything from tourism to the economy, but included no real tangible steps towards achieving this beyond merging some of the public bodies into bigger ones.²¹

Perhaps the biggest internal disappointment during the Welsh Lib–Lab coalition of 2000–2003 concerned the personal problems suffered by the party's leader Michael German. In January 2001 the European anti-fraud organisation began investigating financial problems within the European Unit of the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC). Michael German had been head of the unit for most of the 1990s. The WJEC was run and operated by the Welsh local authorities, the majority of which were Labour-controlled and bitterly opposed to the Lib–Lab coalition. The Labour Party membership had not been consulted over the coalition and most, as we noted earlier, saw this as a case of the 'Liberal tail wagging the Labour dog'. Whether or not the WJEC was politically motivated in its investigations, by May 2001 they had called in the police to examine Michael German's expenses whilst he had worked there. The police investigation eventually concluded that there was 'insufficient evidence to proceed further'.²² The time taken to reach this decision, however, was enough to keep German out of the Cabinet between July 2001 and June 2002.

In his place Jenny Randerson became Deputy First Minister – and the first female Liberal ever to hold a government post in the UK. In the process this made her the most powerful female Liberal Democrat at a government level, arguably until this day. A decade later she was also to become the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Wales in the Westminster coalition government, making her

the only post-war Welsh Liberal to serve in two different coalition governments. At the time, however, Randerson was left with the burdens of office. This left her open to criticism – the *Western Mail's* chief political correspondent referring to her as 'a harassed councillor out of depth'.²³ This comment aside, the situation did place a lot of pressure on just one person to fulfil the Welsh party's coalition ambitions.

Another major negative about the coalition was the naivety of Liberal Democrats over the coalition's various commission reports. The Lib Dems saw these reports as instruments for delivering sweeping changes; whereas Labour saw them merely as reviews, which they could and would choose to ignore.²⁴ Academics reflecting on the Liberal Democrats in coalition in Wales, such as Alan Trench, would later also see this as the party's major failing.²⁵

The final major negative was that they agreed to a number of policies, such as the reorganisation of Local Health Boards, which they had not been fully committed to but delivered as part of the coalition agreement. When these policies were later seen as mistakes, and the party was in opposition once more, the Lib Dems were constrained from criticising them because they had been part of the government that had implemented them.

Reflections on working with the Labour Party

The concept of a coalition at a national level was new to both Labour and the Welsh Liberal Democrats. Whilst the Welsh Liberal Democrats had realised for a long while that they would never form a majority government in their own right, the same was not true of the Labour Party in Wales. However their experience of previously working together in local government did help both Labour and Liberal Democrat AMs bond more quickly. Having been the majority Welsh party at Westminster since 1922, however, Labour did not expect to share power and there was widespread resentment in the grassroots and amongst many Labour AMs and MPs at having the 'Liberal tale wag the Labour dog'.²⁶ In turn the Welsh Liberal

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Democrats later reflected sourly on the failure to change the electoral system for the Welsh Assembly and local government to STV and on Labour's subsequent tinkering with the AMS system to stop candidates standing both in constituencies and on the regional list. This latter was something that they were only able to reverse through the Westminster coalition government almost a decade later.

While it is true that there were not the widespread anonymous press briefings about splits within the coalition that later occurred when Labour went in coalition with Plaid Cymru, neither side looked back on the experience with undiluted pleasure. In fact, such was the reluctance of the two parties to engage again that when the opportunity arose for another coalition, after the 2007 Welsh Assembly election, the Welsh Liberal Democrats rejected a second coalition with Labour in favour of a 'rainbow' coalition with the Conservatives and Plaid Cymru. In turn, Labour preferred to go directly into coalition with Plaid Cymru and leave the Liberal Democrats on the opposition benches.

Between 2000 and 2003 the ideological differences between the parties helped ensure that both parties could remain distinct to the electorate. The Welsh Labour Party always regarded itself as socialist, and the Welsh Liberal Democrats, in contrast, saw themselves as centrists. With decades of hostility in the council chambers of south and north Wales added into the mix, the combination helped ensure that the two parties remained quite distinct. The fact that the Welsh coalition government lasted for less than one four-year term also helped ensure that the two parties kept their distinctiveness.

Unlike the Westminster elections, the date of the Welsh Assembly elections for 2003 was known four years in advance. The problem for the Welsh party was that they did not know whether they would be punished or rewarded for being in coalition with the Labour Party. In the run up to the Iraq War, however, the Welsh election was significantly overshadowed by international rather than domestic issues. The coalition in Wales – and the role of the Lib Dems – therefore made little

impact on the electorate one way or another, and the party stayed stuck on six Assembly Members, and would remain so until 2011. This was partially due to the fact that Wales has a very weak national media, which meant that many in the electorate were unaware of the very fact that there was a coalition government in Wales. For them the focus was still on Westminster, which was the domain of Tony Blair's New Labour government. Then – as now – the Welsh Assembly elections played second fiddle to Westminster, with the main Welsh parties being punished or rewarded by what happened there rather than in Cardiff Bay. In 2003, after the election dust had settled Labour had exactly half of the seats: thirty. Despite Rhodri Morgan indicating before the election that he needed a majority of two AMs to govern, he did not call the Welsh Liberal Democrats back into a coalition. Just as his predecessor Alun Michael had done and his successor Carwyn Jones would later do, he preferred to govern without the Liberal Democrats and as a minority executive.

After the coalition had ended the Welsh Liberal Democrat AMs at its heart were to have varied fortunes. Mike Bates AM left the Assembly in 2011; Eleanor Burnham lost her seat in the same election, having failed to re-secure her position at the top of the North Wales regional list. Peter Black AM remained in the Welsh Assembly and Kirsty Williams became the new Welsh leader in 2008. German and Randerson were both to have further careers at Westminster in the Lords, each having failed to get into the House of Commons when they had contested Cardiff Central unsuccessfully against Labour between 1983 and 1997. Neither played a central role in the Westminster coalition despite both having gained valuable ministerial experience, although Randerson would later be called on to play a junior ministerial role. For some reason the Welsh experience of coalition was not seen by the Federal leadership as being of much value in a Westminster coalition.

The Welsh experience of a Lab–Lib coalition may be entirely different from what is now occurring at the national Westminster level. There were certainly no damaging

internal rows between the parties. There are, however, a few final observations that may be worth recording.

Whilst the Labour members of the Welsh government worked well with the Welsh Liberal Democrats, outside the Assembly hostilities remained constant. There was no coming together of the parties' grassroots – quite the opposite. In the 2004 Welsh council elections the Welsh Liberal Democrats made sweeping gains against Labour and took control of a number of councils including the Welsh capital, Cardiff. There was therefore no desire to remind voters that the two had been in power together only the year before.

Some decisions made in the coalition government had not been truly supported by the Welsh Liberal Democrats and were to prove to be costly disasters such as the reorganisation of the health authorities. In the 2003–7 Welsh Assembly the party could not criticise these failures but the other opposition parties were able to do so.

The Welsh Liberal Democrats were able to get vote-winning policies through which appealed to both the public and its own membership on areas such as free entry into museums and on tuition fees. They were not, however, any good at putting into effect policies that would have benefitted them directly in the long term such as STV for Welsh local government or the Welsh Assembly elections or increasing the number of Assembly members. Whereas the policy successes were soon forgotten by the electorate, the change in the electoral system and the increase in elected members would have done much more to increase their fortunes in the coming years by abolishing the bias of the first past the post electoral system.

Whereas the Welsh Liberal Democrats had always seen themselves as the potential power brokers in any Welsh Assembly government, the reality did not match the expectations. Both Welsh Labour and Welsh Liberal Democrats were so alienated by the experience that they shied away from it when the opportunity arose again in 2007 and 2011. In the event, the Welsh Liberal Democrats dithered and Labour preferred to go with their old political enemies

Plaid Cymru rather than once more with the Welsh Liberal Democrats. Labour still nursed a sense of the tail wagging the dog, while the Welsh Liberal Democrats wished to avoid being aligned once more with what they regarded as a reactionary party that had betrayed the promises of electoral reform.

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GREAT LIBERAL THINKERS: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Baroness Liz Barker and MPs Alan Beith, David Laws and John Pugh draw lessons from past Liberal thinkers for the future direction of the Liberal Democrats. Chair: Malcolm Bruce MP; Twitter: #LDHGFrige. Marks the launch of a new History Group booklet on 'Liberal Thinkers', containing concise summaries of the lives and thoughts of the greatest Liberal thinkers, from John Milton to John Rawls, including John Stuart Mill, Tom Paine, L. T. Hobhouse and many more. See next issue for details

Speakers: **Baroness Liz Barker, Alan Beith MP and John Pugh MP.** Chair: **Malcolm Bruce MP.**

7.45pm, Sunday 5 October

Picasso 2 Room, Campanile Hotel, 10 Tunnel Street, Glasgow G3 8HL

(just outside the conference centre, and outside the secure area – no conference passes necessary)

- Party, 1999).
- 13 Martin Shipton, *Poor Man's Parliament: Ten Years of the Welsh Assembly* (Seren, 2011), p. 52.
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- 22 Russell Deacon, 'The Welsh Liberal Democrats: From Government to Opposition and then back again', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 78, iss. 1 (Blackwell, 2007), p. 160.
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- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 54–55.
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- 10 D. Cutts, E. Fieldhouse and A. Russell, 'The Campaign that Changed Everything and Still Didn't Matter? The Liberal Democrat Campaign and Performance' in A. Geddes and J. Tonge (eds.) *Britain Votes 2010* (Oxford University Press, 2010).
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Who votes for the Liberal Democrats?

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