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Wales and the Brexit Vote

Le pays de Galles et le vote pour le Brexit

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Wales and the Brexit Vote

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Moya Jones

Introduction

- ¹ Welsh voters, like people in Scotland, are now quite used to referendums as the one held on 23 June 2016 on the United Kingdom's continued membership of the European Union was the fifth one to be held in the country since 1975. That year the first ever UK-wide referendum was held on 5 June and British voters were asked whether they wanted to stay in the European Community or if, after two years' membership, they wanted to leave it. On that occasion, the Yes vote in Wales at 65%¹ was slightly lower than the UK figure of 67%. Subsequently Welsh voters were called to vote on 1 March 1979 on the Labour government's proposals for a devolution settlement. There was less appetite in Wales for the proposed Welsh Assembly than there was in Scotland for the Parliament as it was outlined at that time. Only 20.3% voted Yes (whereas in Scotland 58.9% voted in favour). Nothing came of this, not even for Scotland, where the result failed to achieve the 40% of the electorate's approval as stipulated in the Cunningham amendment to the 1978 Scotland Act. Eighteen years later Wales voted again on 18 September 1997, a week after Scotland had voted hugely in favour of the establishment of a Scottish Parliament (74.3%). In Wales the result was more muted – 50.2% of the electorate participated and 50.3% of the votes cast were in favour of setting up a Welsh Assembly. In 2011, Welsh voters faced two referendums: on 3 March they were asked to pronounce on whether the Welsh assembly's legislative powers should be extended, which they approved by 63.5% (turnout 35.6%); and on 5 May, they had their say on the Alternative Vote referendum. Nearly 68% of UK voters rejected a change in the "First past the Post" British voting system whereas in Wales (turnout 41.7%) this rejection was slightly less, at 65.5% of the votes. And then on 23 June 2016 came the fifth referendum, the second vote on membership of the European Union. While the overall result for the UK (turnout 72.2%) was 51.9% who wished to leave the EU, this figure was slightly amplified in Wales (turnout 71.7%) where, overall, the result was 52.5 % in favour of quitting the EU as opposed to 47.5% who wished to stay.

This result contrasted with the other devolved territories, for in Scotland 62% of voters were in favour of the EU membership and in Northern Ireland this figure was 56%. However contrasting or comparing Wales with the other devolved territories is not valid because of regional dimensions to inequality, because of their distinct political histories and because of the asymmetrical nature of UK devolution. Just for the sake of clarity: Wales represents 4.8% of the UK population (England 84%, Scotland 8.3% and Northern Ireland 2.9%).

- 2 However, the major puzzle, as far as Wales is concerned, is why most Welsh voters voted to leave the European Union when, since 1973, the country has received billions of euros in EU funding for infrastructure and economic re-generation. Wales was to receive €1.8 billion from the EU between 2014-20 through structural funding and various programmes. In addition to the guaranteed EU funds for Wales, supplements from other EU funds are also available to Wales. These include the EU's research and innovation fund, Horizon 2020, funds for business and training, the ERASMUS programme, subsidies for agriculture, fisheries among others and could be worth a total of £90bn.²
- 3 We will first examine the way that Welsh votes were distributed across the Principality before looking at the reasons that incited voters to favour the "Leave" option. A brief overview of the profile of "Brexiters" will be followed by a conclusion that summarises how the vote in Wales was in fact quite easy to predict.

Analysis of the geographical distribution of votes

- 4 In 1975 all the regions in Wales voted in favour of staying in the then Common Market whereas in 2016 17 of the 22 regions voted to leave. The geographical distribution of these votes provides a clue as to the reasons behind the vote. It has been fairly widely agreed that across the United Kingdom urban areas with mixed, multicultural populations and where there was a concentration of educated people voted in favour of the EU and this is reflected in Wales. In Cardiff, the political and economic capital and home to several universities and in the Vale of Glamorgan, just to the south, electors voted to remain, although the proportions were different. In Cardiff the split was quite wide (101,788 Remain; 67,816 Leave) whereas in the Vale of Glamorgan it was extremely narrow (36,681 / 35,628). This would then confirm the UK-wide trend just described. A third area, Monmouth, also voted narrowly for Remain (28,061 / 27,569) but the reasons here would not be the same as for Cardiff. Monmouth is situated on the eastern border of Wales and it has a history of being attached to England as well as to Wales, although its position was not finally clarified until the Local Government Act of 1972 which placed it in Wales. Monmouth voters have mostly always elected Conservative MPs and the current Assembly Member (AM) is a Tory, so Monmouth could be said to have more of a split identity or less of a definitely Welsh one. Identification with England and with the Conservative party would partly contribute to explaining the choice made by Monmouth voters. However, this is the very opposite position to that of the other two regions in Wales which voted Remain: Gwynedd (35,517 / 25,665) is in north-west Wales and Ceredigion (21,711 / 18,031) extends from mid-Wales to the sea, between Cardigan and Aberystwyth. What these two regions have in common is that they have the two highest concentrations of Welsh speakers. They both return nationalist Plaid Cymru Assembly Members (AMs) to the Welsh Assembly and have returned nationalist MPs to Westminster too. These two areas have a very strong Welsh identity, underpinned by the language, and

their choice to remain in Europe could maybe be compared to that of SNP supporters in Scotland who saw a brighter future for Scotland within Europe and who were not swayed by fears over immigration but who did believe that the UK economy would not flourish outside of the European structure. However, the vote in Wales was not at all influenced by desires for independence, unlike in Scotland. While support for independence for Wales fell to a low of just 3% in September 2014 the 2016 referendum result did give this movement something of a boost. A substantial minority, 28%, were found to have announced support for Welsh independence if such a move should allow the UK to stay in the EU.³ Even so, today, the question of independence for Wales is not a major factor in the policies of Plaid Cymru which campaigns rather more for extended powers and greater devolution. Nevertheless, Leanne Wood, the party leader, stated after the referendum that the UK needed redesigning and if all four home nations were independent they could actually cooperate in a new way. She reinforced the idea that an independent Wales could rejoin the EU.⁴ Yet, this does not sound like a winning policy when the majority of Welsh voters expressed a desire to leave ...

- 5 However these five regions were in the minority as the other 17 areas voted to leave the EU and, in what seemed to be a paradox, the greatest number of Leave votes were registered in the very areas which have received the most EU support over the years. Substantial amounts of EU subsidies towards structural funding and social projects (European Regional Development Funds (ERDF) and European Social Funds (ESF)),⁵ have been directed notably to the south Wales Valleys between Newport and Swansea and these are the areas that voted in often quite large numbers to Leave: Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath Port Talbot, Newport, Rhondda, Swansea and Torfaen. These areas, which used to be characterised by heavy industry and mining, have been among the hardest hit by the UK's transition to a knowledge based, post-industrial economy. The Leave vote was epitomised by the result in Ebbw Vale, former constituency of Aneurin Bevan and Michael Foot, where unemployment is over 40% and where 62% of those who took part in the referendum voted Leave, the highest percentage in Wales.⁶

Why did Wales vote Leave?

Media and political parties

- 6 The fairly widespread surprise at the “*bizarrely self-defeating*” result in Wales, was expressed and partially explained in an article published in *The Guardian* on 27 June 2016, “*Why did Wales shoot itself in the foot in this referendum?*”⁷ The author, Richard Wyn Jones, is a professor at the Wales School of Governance at the University of Cardiff. He does not believe that the result was due to an old kind of self-loathing and a sense of inferiority which he believes has died away. His historic reference to “*the Welsh giving up on Wales*” relates back to pre-devolution attitudes in Wales, before the creation of the Welsh Assembly in 1998 and before a growing confidence in a distinct Welsh identity began to grow in the wake of the failures of the 1979 referendum. Professor Jones analyses the Welsh vote firstly in terms of a failure of media coverage. Since the media in Wales are depleted and insufficient, unlike in Scotland – there is no national Welsh newspaper for example although there are television and radio channels –, the result is dominance by English media and very little difference was made in those newspapers and television programmes available in Wales about the specificity of Wales. The result was a similar

referendum result to England. To this can be added a certain lassitude on the part of both journalists and voters since the EU referendum came just five weeks after the elections to the Assembly on 5 May. It is felt that covering these elections had led to a feeling of political fatigue.

- 7 However, lacklustre coverage of issues by the media is only one of the factors that combined to produce the Leave result in Wales. Regarding the EU referendum there was also a failure by the major parties and the Welsh government for in Wales they were all too distracted by internal politics to fully engage in the Remain campaign, although all the parties, on paper, were unified in urging a Remain vote. No convincing arguments were made by either Plaid or Labour, which retained power in the Assembly elections in May, to persuade Welsh voters of the benefits of staying in the European Union, nor by the Conservative party in Wales, whose leader campaigned for Leave. The Labour party in particular must take responsibility for the Welsh result. While at UK level the Labour party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn provided half-hearted and muted support for EU membership, within Wales, where Labour have dominated the Assembly since its inception, according to R. W. Jones Labour and devolved politicians have adopted a defensive and protective stance rather than proactive policies: *“politicians in Wales are better known for what they are against – austerity, Tory cuts – rather than what they are for”*. So the referendum message was very indistinct, non-combative and not well communicated.
- 8 But had it been clearer, more vigorous and better disseminated, would campaign messages to vote Remain have been perceived differently by voters? The answer is probably “no” because other factors played a significant role in deciding how people would use their vote.

Social factors

- 9 A report⁸ published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on 31 August 2016 identified the link between poverty, low skills and lack of opportunities and the vote for Brexit. This poll, like many others, found correlations between age, level of education and ethnicity and the way people voted. Early investigations before the vote revealed that regions with the greatest economic dependence on the EU were *more* likely to vote Leave and consequently the results of the referendum showed this to be true. The report concluded firstly that growing inequality in the UK was an important factor in how people decided to vote and that
income and poverty do matter. Groups of voters who have been pushed to the margins of our society, live on low incomes and lack the skills that are required to adapt and prosper amid a post-industrial and global economy, were more likely than others to endorse Brexit.
- 10 Increasing marginalisation and the feeling of being left behind led people to reason that things might be better, or at least not any worse, if the UK were to go it alone, outside Europe. This marginalisation is increased by geographical factors since those communities which feel they are left behind are not the places where new investment and new jobs are to be found. In the case of Wales, as elsewhere in the UK, the closure of the coal mines and the steel works in the south has led to widespread unemployment and continued high rates of worklessness. So it is difficult to compete for jobs with people in other more favoured areas and who also have the skills that are required because those areas are where employment will be created.

- 11 However, it appears that the biggest divide is not geographical or income levels but rather the educational level attained by voters. Support for Brexit was found to be significantly higher by people with only GCSE qualifications or less, and many polls found that there was a correlation across the UK between the Brexit vote and areas with high shares of people with no education.⁹ There is an acknowledged graduate gap in Wales, a brain drain of talent, as Wales is a net loser of graduates each year, having lower retention rates than the other devolved nations in terms of both the proportion of students who remain to study, and the proportion of graduates who subsequently get jobs within Wales. Leaving the country is associated with better jobs, higher earnings and higher rates of self-employment.¹⁰
- 12 Regarding the generation gap, Wales reflected UK-wide tendencies over the age divide with younger voters opting to Remain while older people tended to vote for Brexit. However, while 67% of under-30s in Wales did vote to Remain, Wales only ranked 8th out of 11 regions for under-30 support for staying in the EU thereby showing relatively Eurosceptic tendencies.¹¹ Research carried out by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research Data and Methods (WISERD) at Cardiff University revealed that young Welsh voters use social media less than others across the UK and potentially relied on television and the press plus more face to face means for gaining information on the referendum. This might well be explained by the patchy internet service provided across Wales and the weak phone signals in many parts of the country. But this research also showed that even if on the day young people had voted in the same proportions as over 65s (the group with the highest turnout), the final result of the referendum would not have changed and the Leave vote would still have prevailed in Wales and across the UK. So it would seem that in explaining the choice made by Wales generational divide does not in fact apply and neither does the ethnic factor.
- 13 Analysis of the referendum vote across the UK inevitably has to consider the impact of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) votes which across England mostly voted Remain but these groups of voters had no impact on the Welsh result since 93.2% of the population is white British (95.6% of the population is white).

“Nothing to lose”

- 14 These academic findings, on income, skills and level of education were borne out in a BBC programme broadcast a month after the vote¹² when reporters travelled to Ebbw Vale to find out why in this area voters had rejected the European Union so massively (62%). As in many other places in the UK, the issues of migrants and controlling British borders were raised but again this pattern revealed that the areas of greatest immigrant concern were areas where there are the least number of migrants. Deprivation in the Valleys was partly blamed on migrants and Poles in particular who represented more competition for jobs and who were accused of working for lower wages and for putting strain on local infrastructures, such as schools, housing and hospitals. But these seemed to be more of an identifiable target rather than an actual threat.
- 15 When questioned about EU support that had brought sports centres, new roads and town centre renovation interviewees explained that none of this really made any difference to their lives, that they felt like second class citizens in their own country and that they had nothing to lose. There is a lack of recognition that EU funding has had any impact on their lives and there was no connection to life experiences nor to tangible job creation.

Job disappearances are what affects the area. For example, the Ebbw Vale Steelworks was once the largest steelworks in Europe. The Anglo- Dutch owners, Corus, closed it in 2002 with a loss of 780 jobs; the Ebbw Vale Steel, Iron and Coal Company, founded in 1780 and employing 34,000 people at the turn of the 20th century, also closed in 2002, when it was still the largest tinsplate producer in Britain. Leave voters said in their TV interviews that they felt “let down”. The paradox is symbolised by the Heads of the Valleys Road, the A465, and the section between Dowlais Top and Tredegar which was recently redeveloped thanks to ERDF money. One interviewee remarked that it didn’t really serve his valley and villages since it was “a nice bypass”, making it easier to avoid the area.

A predictable result

- 16 It is clear that there was or is a reality gap between the policies and pronouncements from on high, central authorities, whether they be the heads of political parties, the Westminster government or the EU chiefs in Brussels and the electors in the polling booths but the result of the referendum should not have been a surprise in the UK¹³ and especially not in Wales since the results of the general election on 7 May 2015¹⁴ and the Welsh Assembly elections on 5 May 2016¹⁵ clearly indicted disaffection with the Establishment and with the major political parties. Firstly, in the general election, the British electoral system, known as “First past the post” (FPTP), produced rather skewed results. The results of the general election in the UK produced a victory for the Conservative party which won 331 seats with a majority of 12 in the House of Commons, and this was based on having won 36.9% (or 11,334,92) of all the votes cast. However the Scottish National Party moved into third place behind Labour by winning 56 seats on the strength of 1,454,436 votes which was 4.7% of votes cast that day. Meanwhile, 3,881,129 people voted for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). This represented 12.6% of the votes but only translated into one seat. As early as January 2013 David Cameron proposed to hold a referendum on EU membership and it is widely acknowledged that this was done in a bid to appease Tory voters who were defecting to UKIP. In Wales the general election results saw UKIP make the biggest gains among the six leading parties and it captured 13.6% of the vote although not enough in any constituency to win an MP. However, almost a year later in the Welsh Assembly elections UKIP made a massive bound forward in capturing 12.5% of the constituency votes, in the FPTP vote although again this did not translate into any seats in the Senedd. Yet, in the regional vote where the proportional representation method applies for the election of additional members in the Welsh Assembly, UKIP secured 7 seats spread across the five electoral regions with an average of 13.2% of the votes. This result is uniquely Welsh and is not reflected in results in any of the other elected governing assemblies in the UK.
- 17 Traditionally Wales always used to be a Labour stronghold but the Welsh Labour party is losing its appeal and is again running a minority administration in Cardiff. The gap between politicians and those they represent was characterised in Wales by the nature of the Remain campaign which was first overshadowed by wrangling in the Assembly about the post of First Minister which eventually went to Labour’s Carwyn Jones and then by the fact that there was no credible or cohesive message on the part of Remainers. Many leading Welsh politicians were on a different side to the voters in their areas including Carwyn Jones (Bridgend), Leanne Wood, head of Plaid (Rhondda) and Stephen Crabb, Conservative Secretary for Wales (Pembrokeshire). Bizarrely, the same thing happened in

the pro-Leave camp as the Conservative leader Andrew RT Davies was ignored (Vale of Glamorgan) like David Davies in Monmouth. As stated earlier, this is being seen in terms of re-ordering of electoral politics in Wales expressed not only in terms of the lack of connection with the political leadership but also in the way people feel. The chasm between voters and the political elite is reflected around the globe, as proved by the support for Trump in America, Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and so on. This cumulative movement would therefore not seem to be just about the EU referendum but more about disenfranchisement and exclusion. And when the opportunity came to vote in a referendum with a clear Yes/ No choice, people seized the chance to tell the self-appointed, distant elites what they thought. Voter turnout in Wales at 71.7% was higher than it was for general election (65.6%) and the Welsh Assembly election (45.3%) proving that interest in the EU question was high, whatever the reason.

Conclusion

- 18 The fact that the UK's different nations have voted in different ways contains the makings of a constitutional crisis. It is unlikely that the devolution settlements will be unpicked but the future of the UK is uncertain, inside the EU or outside, in terms of domestic governance. There is talk of reunification in Ireland just as the notion of a "hard" border is also being invoked. In Scotland many are now agitating for a second referendum on independence in order to stay in the European Union. For Wales, there could be opportunity in that Brexit maybe offers a chance to negotiate and ask for more from Westminster in terms of funding and devolved powers. The Wales Bill being debated in the House of Lords (end of October 2016) is the chance to do just this and reframe the relationship between Cardiff Bay and Westminster with new powers over energy, transport and elections, among others being devolved to Cardiff. However, it is felt in many quarters, among academics and politicians, that with the fractures exposed by the EU referendum, this amendment of the Government of Wales Act 2006 is not a clear enough piece of legislation and is too full of complexities and contradictions. The crux of the matter was explained in the House of Lords second reading of the bill on 10 October 2016 by Lord Morgan of Aberdovey

(...) it would be very important to clear up all these issues before we have Brexit. Brexit will have a major impact on Wales in almost every aspect: in agriculture, education, industry, and almost every feature you can think of. It is crucial to have constitutional clarity within the United Kingdom and between all its governmental institutions before the iron curtain comes down.¹⁶

- 19 As a last word, four months after the fatal vote in June 2016, an ITV Wales/Cardiff University YouGov poll¹⁷ found Welsh voters would vote Remain by 53% and Leave by 47% if there was a second EU referendum, reflecting patterns seen across the UK. But the constitutional and political complexities of finding some way of over-turning or re-running the vote, means that these Bregrets may not count for much.
- 20 **Moya JONES is professor of British Studies at the University of Bordeaux MONTAIGNE, France. A graduate of the LSE, she is the author of numerous articles and publications in French and English, focussing on centres and peripheries: multicultural Britain and the new constitutional settlements in the United Kingdom. One of her particular areas of interest is Wales and Welsh studies.**

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ABSTRACTS

On 23 June 2016 Wales, like England, voted to leave the European Union. This vote may seem curious in the light of the fact that Wales has been the recipient of generous EU funding over the past forty years. However, Welsh voters' preference for an exit is possibly explained by a number of factors which highlight Wales's distinctive profile, for it resembles neither Scotland nor Northern Ireland. These reasons include political and social patterns within Wales as well as party politics and also possible failures in communication. However, the Welsh vote was predictable.

Tout comme l'Angleterre, le 23 juin 2016 le pays de Galles a voté en faveur d'une sortie de l'Union européenne. Or, à première vue, ce choix serait difficile à comprendre car le pays de Galles a été destinataire, pendant plus de quarante ans, de fonds en provenance de l'UE. Cependant, un certain nombre de facteurs auraient influencé la décision des Gallois. Parmi ces raisons on peut nommer la spécificité identitaire du pays, ainsi que le rôle joué par différentes formations politiques. On peut pointer aussi un certain déficit de communication. Néanmoins, le résultat gallois était prévisible.

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