

Race and nation in Wales

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Does Wales have a nationally distinctive
approach to race?

Defining Wales

The very existence of the Welsh nation is in some senses oppositional. The most original and theoretically sophisticated history of the Welsh, Gwyn Alf Williams's *When was Wales?*, locates the formation of the people within the period of resistance against the Saxon invasions, which produced a border for a people having much in common.¹ They were defined by the invaders as Welsh (foreigners), while they called themselves Cymry (companions). Subsequent Welsh history was in some ways a dialectical process, in which the cross-border thesis created an internal antithesis - the many and changing iterations of Welshness. After the acts of incorporation of 1536 and 1543, which declared Wales to be legally a part of the Kingdom of England, there was a process of asserting the distinctiveness of the culture and history of the nation; while, in the nineteenth century, the dominance of Nonconformity and Liberal politics led to efforts to bend the imperial state to create a place for Wales through separate legislation (Sunday closing, intermediate schools disestablishment), and the creation of national institutions (National Library, National Museum, University of Wales). None of this fuelled much in the way of a sense of Welsh independence. To find the Welsh to be the first of the British was to assert a claim for recognition; so, too, were the later institutions and legislation of the era of liberal hegemony. The claims of Wales were for voice and not exit.

History could be problematic in this situation. It was commonly held that there

Soundings

was no separate Welsh history after the conquest of 1282-3 or after the Tudor incorporation. Even when the first professional historians emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they struggled to write modern history, and many had a conviction that industrial Wales was not really Wales - as Saunders Lewis, one of the founders of Plaid Cymru in 1925 and its dominant figure in the interwar period, wrote of the devastated steel and coal town of Dowlais in 1939: 'here *once* was Wales'. For some people, English, Irish and Spanish incomers, as well as people of colour who had migrated from further afield (the majority of whom lived in the ports of Cardiff, Newport and Swansea), along with the decline of the Welsh language in many (but not all) industrial areas, gave a sense that Wales had been denatured. Wales was seen as a peculiarly divided nation, and this was usually understood in terms of binary oppositions: 'North/South; English speaking/Welsh speaking; rural/urban; rugby/football; and the split between the two major dialects of the Welsh language. None of these oppositions is absolute, nor have they ever mapped perfectly on to each other. There has been little or no effort to examine them comparatively. Nations are, after all, imagined communities projected upon people of diverse classes and identities. Is Wales any more divided than Italy or the United States - or, we might add England, or Scotland, with its Highlands and Lowlands - in terms of the popular stereotypes which Northerners and Southerners have of each other?

Division was one of the factors underlying the traumatic event of the rejection of devolution in 1979, when Scotland and Wales held referenda for schemes of devolved government proposed by the Labour government, in an attempt to head off the electoral progress of nationalist parties. In Wales four out of five voters rejected devolution, and, although no area of Wales recorded anything like a majority in favour of the proposal, the rural and Welsh-speaking areas were slightly more favourable. More importantly, the mutual suspicions of a divided Wales were fundamental. Who would dominate the new government - the Welsh speakers of Gwynedd or the anglicised Labour Party machine of the south? Each of these constituencies was caricatured by the other, and was unacceptable to the other.

Language and the closely related area of broadcasting were central to these divisions. Both had been intensely debated since the 1960s. Cymdeithas yr Iaith Cymreg (The Welsh Language Society) had been formed in 1962, largely in response to a warning from Saunders Lewis that the language would be dead by the year

Race and nation in Wales

2000 unless action was taken. Many protests followed looking for bilingualism from the state. Protestors obliterated English names on road signs, and demands for more Welsh-language broadcasting were widespread. This needs to be seen in the context of other civil rights organisations of the period: its style of direct action was very much part of an international trend. However, it also spurred much reaction and hostility to the Welsh language. Its defence was labelled as 'forcing it down our throats' by many who were not Welsh speakers.

The initial response of many nationalists in 1979 was despondency. Thatcher's election victory followed closely on the heels of the referendum vote, and Wales was very soon to feel the full effects of the UK government's policies. The steel industry was devastated, followed quickly by coal, and the situation was exacerbated by branch plant closures in manufacturing industry - the new industries promoted after 1945 to offset the decline of heavy industry. Shortly after the end of the miners' strike in 1985, quiet voices in favour of devolution began to be heard again. The Thatcher governments did recognise the distinctiveness of Welsh politics to some extent, and entered into some sort of dialogue with the opposition and even with trade unions. But when John Redwood was appointed secretary of state for Wales in 1993, Thatcherism in its starkest form was on full display. The joke in Wales subsequently was that the Assembly (now the Senedd) should erect a statue to him outside its new building, as he had done more to bring it into existence than most.

That joke says something about the realities of the new movement for devolved government. Its achievement in another referendum in 1997 by the slimmest of majorities has been seen as a passive revolution made by elites with little popular involvement.² Agreements between Plaid Cymru and the Labour Party were fundamental to securing it. Half of the seats were to be elected by a form of PR to restrict the dominance of Labour. The two parties had often been bitter rivals, yet much of the political culture of twentieth century Wales had been shaped by their interactions.

Labour in Wales had quickly shed its early commitments to some kind of home rule for Wales, but, because it was faced with a nationalist opposition, it had to develop policies in relation to Wales, and often proclaimed itself to be the 'party of Wales', in the sense that its values and aspirations were as one with the Welsh people. Indeed, voting Labour had spread beyond the class boundaries which constrained it in England. After 1945 it had broken out of its valleys' heartland

Soundings

into rural Wales. Montgomeryshire is the only constituency which it has not held at some point.³ Plaid, in turn, needed to address issues of the economy and social democracy on which Labour based its claims. In the 1960s, Plaid won a parliamentary seat for the first time and was a serious challenger in some Labour heartlands. It also won the allegiance of many of the young and bright political activists of the post-war era. It had always punched above its numerical weight because of its disproportionate share of the intellectuals of Wales, especially Welsh-speaking ones - though from the 1960s onwards there was an increasing number of English ones too. But Plaid remained a 'sturdy dwarf plant', having to exist but not able to grow. Its most fertile soil was in mainly rural Welsh-speaking areas with an industrial past, which essentially meant the old slate-quarrying districts of Gwynedd and the western edge of the South Wales coalfield in Carmarthenshire. The exception which proved the rule was Ceredigion, which was won with the additional help of a Green alliance in 1992.

When devolved government came back on to the agenda, it was essential that the old divisions were overcome. Conceptions of the Welsh nation in public discussion were already overwhelmingly civic rather than ethnic.⁴ In 2001, Ieuan Wyn Jones, the leader of Plaid, declared that all the people of Wales were Welsh. There was now a stress on inclusivity; and it was this which opened the door to discussions about issues of race and ethnicity within the mainstream.⁵

Recovering other histories

To most people in Wales in the postwar period, race was regarded as being something connected to the multiracial community of Butetown in Cardiff's docklands, which had been the area where people lived who had initially arrived because of the port's international trade. Butetown was seen as a place which exemplified Welsh values of tolerance and inclusion, but it was also hidden away behind physical barriers, and there was a folklore that it was a dubious and possibly dangerous place to go at night. The designation 'Tiger Bay' hinted at an allegedly ferocious past - though Shirley Bassey, whose roots were in the area, was celebrated. The more critical pointed out that non-white faces were rarely seen in the central areas of Cardiff.

Another part of the Welsh tradition of 'tolerance' was the special relationship of Welsh labour movement culture with Paul Robeson, who had made contact

Race and nation in Wales

with Welsh miners from 1927, and was an occasional visitor. In 1957, the South Wales miners arranged for him to sing at their eisteddfod in Porthcawl via a transatlantic telephone link, after Robeson's passport had been confiscated by the FBI. Robeson's film *The Proud Valley* (1940), set in the valleys of Welsh tolerance, was the only one that he said he felt proud of. The film reinforced the idea of the welcoming Welsh: when, after a miner objected to David Goliath's place in the community because he was Black, the retort was 'Drat it all, aren't we all Black in the mine!'. Such images had a long shelf life, and were reworked in Ron Berry's novel *Flame and Slag* (1968), as well as in Duncan Bush's poems on the strike of 1984-5, *Black Faces, Red Mouths* (1986).⁶

The writing of modern Welsh history, and especially post-1850 developments, was very much a product of the post-war period, and historians tended to focus on industrialisation, popular protest and politics. Little attention was paid to questions of race and ethnicity. Particular events became iconic, exemplars of the democratic and rebellious history of modern Wales: the Merthyr Rising of 1831; the Newport Rising of 1839; the Rebecca Riots of 1839-43; and the Cambrian Combine strike of 1910-11, at the centre of which were the Tonypany disturbances. There was also a major focus on the elections of 1868, which marked the beginning of a long period of Liberal dominance in Welsh politics, which was only challenged by the rise of Labour in the early twentieth century. Wales was seen as having had a proud radical history, and as having shaped contemporary Britain because of Lloyd George's laying of the foundations of the welfare state and Nye Bevan's role in the creation of the NHS. These themes spread across the history profession in Wales, but the popular revolts were an especial concern of the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History, *Llafur* (Labour - though not in the party-political sense). The Society was formed in 1970-1, and attracted the younger scholars in particular - very much the generation of 1968. It has published an annual journal, also called *Llafur*, since 1971.

But historical research can also reveal a darker side. The race riots in Cardiff in 1919 were not totally unknown, and had never been forgotten in Butetown, the community under attack, which had mounted a spirited defence against the rioters. But the events have become much more widely known in recent years, after I stumbled upon the press accounts of them which showed their violence and significance. What I wrote about the events in the early 1980s is almost certainly

Soundings

the most cited thing I've ever published.⁷ The wider question raised by these events was how this history sat with the stories by which Wales understood itself. There was more evidence which pointed in the same direction. Scholars from outside Wales, mainly Jewish ones, uncovered the story of the anti-Semitic riots which had erupted across the eastern valleys in 1911 - which were interpreted as the worst such attacks in Britain since the middle ages. Anti-Irish riots were quickly added to the list. Within just over a decade, immigrants and minorities, and the attitudes towards them in Wales, became an acknowledged theme in Welsh radical history. *Llafur* devoted a special issue to the topic in 1991, which also included work on the experience of the Welsh abroad. In 2000, Paul O'Leary published a stunning monograph (really it is far more than that), *Immigration and Integration: The Irish in Wales 1798-1922*.⁸

That historians led the way in this field of scholarship was really the result of a missed opportunity by social anthropologists. In 1948, Kenneth Little had published what is now seen as the first book on race relations in the UK: *Negroes in Britain: A Study of Race Relations in English Society*.⁹ The highly inaccurate title disguised its content effectively. At its core was a study of Butetown that had been conducted during the Second World War - which was a mixed-race community, many of whom were Arabs rather than 'Negroes', not to mention the Chinese, Malays and many other minorities. So the study was neither of England nor of anything that could be encapsulated by the term 'Negro'. The book also had a substantial introductory section charting the experience of Black people in Britain since the Tudor period. Unsurprisingly, it had a number of critics from the Butetown community, who objected to the way it created racialised hierarchies in imitation of studies of colonial societies.¹⁰

At the time the university in Aberystwyth was doing pioneering social anthropological work on Welsh rural communities, but no connection was made with Little's work. During this period there was a focus on searching for the essence of Welshness in rural areas, and part of the intellectual context for this was a great interest in blood groups and cranium measurement. There were some suggestions that only Welsh scholars could penetrate these rural communities. When two English scholars conducted studies in north Wales from their base in Manchester's social anthropology department, they were seen by some as being disabled by their origins. It can be argued that Little's work did not connect theoretically with either

Race and nation in Wales

of these two schools - which focused on 'ethnic groups', and placed stress on conflict and class respectively - but it is hard to escape the conclusion that a modern urban community of cosmopolitan origins was below a bridge too far for many, given their conceptions of what Welshness and Britishness was. It was in this period that Nora Glasgow Richer, who had a Liberian father and a Welsh-speaking mother (though she was not fluent in Welsh herself), applied to join Plaid Cymru, filling in the application form in Welsh. She was refused membership, on the grounds that 'Dr Davies thought it would cause confusion'¹¹

Another opportunity for greater understanding was also missed at around the same time. St Clair Drake, senior author of the classic study of Chicago's South Side, *Black Metropolis*, came to Cardiff to do fieldwork just as Little's book was going through the press. However, he published very little from his research, and it remained largely unknown in Wales for decades - though of course many people in Butetown would have remembered him. His failure to publish more from this work was partly related to his workload at Roosevelt University, but an additional factor was his concern that a limited anthropological snapshot, along with his stress on divisions within the community, might be detrimental to Black politics in Britain.¹² Nevertheless, Drake's work was to have a delayed impact many years later.

In the mid-1980s, Glenn Jordan, a student of Drake and a Californian veteran of the Black Power movement, arrived in Cardiff to continue the research, and he quickly achieved something quite remarkable. Instead of completing his thesis, he organised and inspired people in the community to do their own research into the area's history. Local residents conducted oral history interviews, collected photographs and documents, and produced an archive from the people, as a counter to the decades of adverse publicity which the community had attracted. This people's history project led to the creation of the Butetown History and Arts Centre, which mounted a series of exhibitions and events, and succeeded in attracting grant-funding for decades. It also published a series of books, autobiographical in the main but also two volumes on the history of the community written from within by Neil Sinclair. The series was ambitious and visionary. But, shamefully, in 2016 it was forced to close when its funding was not renewed. Its collections have gone to the Glamorgan Archives and some are now being digitised; while that work is welcome, the closure of the centre has removed a vital social organisation from the community and a potential base for a museum of Black history in Wales. It remains

Soundings

a remarkable achievement of history from below and an alternative voice placed into public discussion.

The interventions of Charlotte Williams had an even more resonant impact on the public sphere in Wales. Williams was the first person in Wales to see the potential of the Census questions on race and ethnicity that were introduced in 1991. This meant that there were figures available for the distribution and size of the population of colour in Wales for the first time. There had been little study of post-1945 migration into Wales, though there was an awareness that migrants had settled outside Butetown in the main. By this time Butetown had been brutally 'redeveloped', and much of its population had been scattered into other districts of Cardiff. Some, but not all, had moved back to the tower blocks and surrounding low-rise housing which had replaced the earlier mainly Victorian housing. Williams's work in her discipline of social policy revealed discrimination and racism, and also that Wales had a population of colour which was not confined to inner Cardiff, though it remained concentrated in Greater Cardiff.

Williams conceived of an edited volume which would bring together the historical and contemporary research being produced in this field, and invited Paul O'Leary and me to join with her in editing it. The resulting volume, *A Tolerant Nation? Exploring Ethnic Diversity in Wales*, had a bigger impact than was usually the case for articles in academic journals.¹³ Its publication was supported financially by the Commission for Racial Equality in Wales, and it quickly sold out its print run. The title became a shorthand for the nature of the issue in Wales, though many seemed to ignore the very big question mark which we had placed after the main title. The book was republished in 2015 in a much revised and extended edition, now with the subtitle *Exploring Ethnicity in a Devolved Wales*.

More importantly, in the same year Charlotte published *Sugar and Slate*, a book that was made Welsh Book of the Year.¹⁴ It is best described as an autoethnography. Slate was a reference to her mother, born and raised in the slate-quarrying community of Bethesda, who had met and married the distinguished Guyanese artist Denis Williams in London in the late 1940s. The sugar in the title referred to her father. Williams made it clear that the development of industry in Bethesda had depended significantly on the profits generated by enslaved labour in Jamaica. There had been some research on that connection in Wales in the 1980s, as well as on abolitionism, but it had not previously entered public discussion in the same way as

Race and nation in Wales

Butetown's history, or histories of immigration. Only subsequently would the work of Chris Evans produce more general awareness of this issue, at first in a television programme and later in his book *Wales and Slavery*.¹⁵

Williams was partly motivated by a search for her identity. She was often asked 'Are you from Africa?' and she would think: 'Yeah - the long way around'. The answers she found led to a book that, albeit in a very different context, could be seen as the Welsh equivalent of the classic W.E.B. Du Bois text *The Souls of Black Folk*. The story was a complex one. Her father's work had taken the family to Africa when Williams was young: this was not simply to earn money, he was looking for his own roots. In Wales they had lived in the upmarket resort of Colwyn Bay, a place of singular isolation for someone of Charlotte's background - Butetown might have been more accommodating. Eventually her own work, as well as that of her husband, took her to Guyana, partly to reconnect with her father, who had abandoned his Welsh family and returned there. But the conclusion of her search was that she was Welsh, and that was where she belonged.

That was a radical conclusion in many ways. A few years earlier, when I was an audience member at a public discussion about Welsh history in Cardiff, Betty Campbell, who was the first Black headmistress in Wales, and had introduced Black history into the curriculum at Mount Stuart School, asked from the floor whether this Wales included her. By this time Campbell was a well-known figure in Wales, yet when calling her to speak the chair of the meeting referred to her as 'the lady in the front'. As I recall she got no clear answer to her question.

Sugar and Slate put the issue of race firmly into the public sphere in Wales, beyond the reach of academia and radical history, and was a seismic cultural event. It sold well despite being published by a small publishing house. In 2022 it was reprinted by Parthian Books in the Library of Wales series underwritten by the Welsh government, with a new introduction by Hazel Carby. The following year it was chosen by Bernardine Evaristo for inclusion in her Penguin series 'Black Britain: Writing Back'.

Is there a distinctly Welsh approach to race?

The Welsh Assembly (as it then was) was first elected in 1999. Inclusion, as we have seen, was prominent on the agenda from the beginning. Some of the ministers

Soundings

had cut their political teeth in third-sector bodies and campaigns for social justice. The most inclusive aspect of devolution was the prominence of women in its membership and ministerial appointments. Charlotte Williams was an obvious adviser on race and social justice, and fulfilled a series of roles. Moreover, Anti-Apartheid in Wales had had a distinctive flavour and had drawn in people from the Butetown community, in contrast with its cross-border parent body.

The 1998 Devolution Act was passed early in the life of the first New Labour government, and there was a New Labour government for the first thirteen years of the Welsh Assembly. Labour came to power backing multiculturalism: it published the MacPherson Report in 1999, and passed a Race Relations Act in 2000 which recognised the idea of institutional racism. But it quickly succumbed to opposition from the mainstream press and establishment, and shifted towards policies of discipline and assimilation. In 2001, there was a major shift in attitudes towards Muslims in Britain, in the context of 9/11 and imperial wars against Muslim countries. A polarity was subsequently identified between an allegedly non-integrated population of migrant origins and the 'left-behind' white working class. Little was done to regenerate former industrial areas by a government fixated on 'Middle England', and into this space the ethnicised grouping of a 'white working class' emerged.¹⁶

Wales was rather different. It was, in general, territory for Old Labour rather than New, while in the first Assembly elections of 1999 Plaid Cymru had made advances into the valleys, even, symbolically, taking the Rhondda constituency. Under the leadership of Labour's Rhodri Morgan, a policy of 'clear red water' was announced to distance Welsh Labour from London. Wales did not experience anything equivalent to the Northern riots of 2001, and indeed had seen only very minor instances of the post-1980 ghetto rebellions. So, what kind of policy could be expected in the field of forces which existed in Wales?

When I was trying to understand the way in which racism operated in interwar Butetown I drew on the idea of the local state. The population received the mainly unwelcome attentions of a range of bodies, some of which were locally based, like the city council and its watch committee and the poor law guardians. The chief constable was variously the cheerleader of racial stereotyping and hostility or a key supplier of information to others who took up the role. Other actors were local representatives of central government, such as immigration officers and the Colonial Office. The Home Office also exercised some control over the police, and

Race and nation in Wales

the Local Government Board over the poor law. Resistance to this came from locally based political and religious groups, as well as a number of white-led charities and religious bodies. An appeal could also be made to the wider empire, something which many Black political groups used; what happened in Cardiff would not stay in Cardiff, and could feed aspirations to freedom in the wider world. This meant that there was no formal legal discrimination, as with Jim Crow laws in the US, but much by employers, landlords, entertainment venues, cafes and restaurants.¹⁷ What was lacking was any specifically Welsh dimension of action.

As the empire won its freedom, it became a less important factor in domestic politics, yet the Commonwealth still exercised a role, and had a considerable influence on anti-discrimination legislation. But the open door to empire and Commonwealth which had existed from 1948 was shifted to an ajar position, and finally virtually closed. For its part, New Labour had also created a separate and draconian system for asylum seekers and refugees. What difference could devolution make in this context? Early efforts by the devolved government came as parts of the inclusion agenda. While this was a top-down initiative, efforts were made to involve minorities and to build organisations which would speak for them in the public arenas of what was seen as a deficient civil society.¹⁸ In the past, the idea of a tolerant nation had been used to deny the need for action. Now the interpretation was that, because of the heritage of tolerance, current abuses could not be accepted. Real confrontation with the history was often avoided.

There were also tensions over the representation of minority ethnic people, and over emerging versions of the nation which sometimes seemed to exclude them or to demean their experiences. At the outset of devolved government there were very few Black councillors and no non-white appointee of the secretary of state; and there remains a considerable deficit in many public appointments. The talk of inclusion had raised hopes for some in minority communities, but these were dashed in the selection processes for Assembly members, and it would be 2007 before Mohamed Ashgar was elected as the first non-white and Muslim representative as a list member for Plaid Cymru. (In previous incarnations Ashgar had been a Conservative and Labour member, and in 2009 he caused much controversy by joining the Conservative group.) By 2025 there were three minority ethnic members of the Senedd - 5 per cent of all members. But this was below the percentage for the minority ethnic proportion of the population, which was

Soundings

5.9 per cent in 2011 and has increased since. Only in 2021 was a minority-ethnic woman elected, Natasha Ashgar, the daughter of Mohamed. The most prominent Welsh politician from an ethnic minority background was Vaughan Gething, born in Zambia to a Welsh father and a Zambian mother, who was elected to represent Cardiff South and Penarth in 2011.

Civic nationalism was not the only variety available. Groups campaigning for civil rights for Welsh speakers, like Cefn, and to restrict settlement in majority Welsh-speaking areas, like Cymuned, could also clash with civic inclusion, given the assumption that people of colour are not Welsh speakers. (This is not true: there are currently some 15,000 Welsh-speaking minority ethnic people.) There was a major controversy in October 2019 when the pre-conference comments of Adam Price, the leader of Plaid Cymru, caused considerable offence to minority ethnic activists. He argued that Wales needed reparations for the resources which had been robbed from it during industrialisation, which had left behind nothing but poverty. Price found this process of wealth extraction analogous to the practice of colonialism, if not identical. His analysis had been presented in a public lecture a decade previously and subsequently published as the lead and title essay in a collection of his speeches: *Wales: the First and Final Colony*, which attracted little attention at the time.¹⁹ It seemed like a throwback to the position of Gwynfor Evans - the influential Plaid Cymru politician who was the party's first Westminster MP; but it was now adorned by theories Evans would not have dreamt of, acquired from a stay in Harvard, and embroidered with a talent for inflated rhetoric. In the political context of 2019, these ideas caused an uproar, with Vaughan Gething taking a prominent part in the debate. But the debate was about more than party political positioning. Black communities wanted the idea of reparations to be reserved for slavery and imperialism, and twenty-one community leaders wrote an open letter to Price condemning his remarks. He was forced to apologise.

After Black Lives Matter

As with so many things, the coming of the pandemic in 2020, during which a widespread Black Lives Matter movement erupted after the filmed murder of George Floyd went viral, seemed to be a turning point. This was the context of a global public sphere and calls for further decolonisation. The Welsh government took on a series of dramatic initiatives. The presence of the past in the land and

Race and nation in Wales

townscape was confronted with a working group on monuments, statues and street names, to examine how many of them commemorated imperialists and slave traders: how much of a problem could we see here? The present and immediate future was addressed by the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, which aimed to make Wales free of racism by 2030: there certainly was a problem here and it needed to be addressed. Finally, the longer-term future was addressed by a working group on the school curriculum which mandated the teaching of Black history in schools; Mark Drakeford, the then first minister, declared that 'Black history is Welsh history'. All these initiatives drew on the experiences and advice of civil society groups in widespread consultations.²⁰

The transatlantic context was important, but there were plenty of incidences of local racism. Differential ethnic death rates for Covid-19 were a major concern, and there were a number of other issues, many of which were already being addressed by prior policy initiatives. Grassroots organisations' concern for refugees had already prompted action from the Welsh government. For example, Carwyn Jones (first minister 2009- 2018) had warmed to the idea of a city of sanctuary, something which was being developed in cities in England such as Sheffield in 2012. The long summer of migration of 2015 led to Syrian refugees being dispersed to twenty out of the twenty-two local authorities in Wales, making the issue nation-wide rather than one that only applied to Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and Wrexham. In 2019 Wales was declared to be the first *nation* of sanctuary in the world. This was a form of moral nationalism. Such an approach had already been evident in the Well-being of Future Generations Act of 2015, which required policymakers to think of the long-term consequences of their actions, and set out goals and monitoring systems, with a commissioner being appointed to report annually on progress. One of the aims was for a more equal Wales and this specifically included racial equality, though with no real detail.

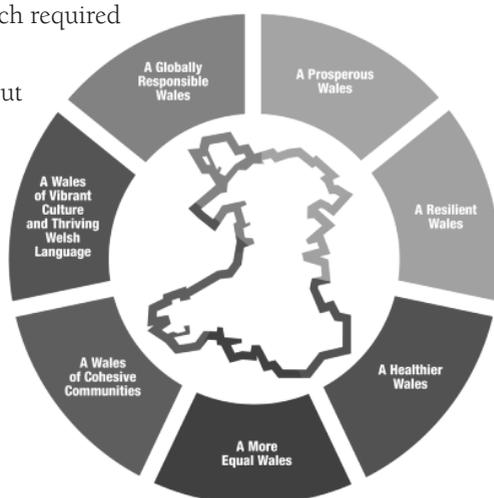


FIGURE 1: Well-being goals

Source: <https://www.gov.wales/well-being-future-generations-act-essentials-html>

Soundings

These were aspirations, and problems in achieving them can easily be detected. The Welsh government has no powers over migration but can only aid asylum seekers sent to Wales by Westminster. It has few economic levers, and policing and justice - major areas of concern for anti-racists - are not devolved. Nor is the Welsh government seeking powers over them. It is not clear that these aspirations will actually be implemented. A recently elected first minister who has denied that Trump is a racist does not inspire much confidence.²¹

The desire to define Wales in moral terms, to decolonise institutional life, and to reconsider the place of Wales in the international order, is laudable. It is argued that all citizens will benefit from these policies, and that the object of educational policy is the creation of 'ethical and engaged citizens of Wales and the world'. The contrast with the Westminster Conservative government's position was clearly seen in the contents of its widely condemned Sewell report, which denied the existence of institutional racism and was seen as having its findings determined by its composition.²² Clear multi-coloured water was created. Welsh policy gained much attention in the wider world.

A space has been constructed in which concerns about race can be raised, and there is access to ministers likely to be sympathetic. In that sense Wales is exceptionalist, at least compared with Westminster. This argument cannot, however, be extended to Welsh society, its political landscape and public sphere as a whole. Far-right parties are active and plenty of racism is apparent in social media discussions. Nevertheless, this space provides something that was totally absent in interwar Wales - although it has to be seen through the lens of a Gramscian conception of civil society as an arena of conflict and struggle, rather than one of integration and harmony.

There was also something symbolic, but involving real power, in the career of Vaughan Gething. Gething came to Wales at the age of two, became a solicitor, joined the Labour Party at seventeen and was active in local politics as a councillor. After his election to the National Assembly in 2011, he quickly gained a succession of ministerial roles. He was an outspoken opponent of racism and frequently made reference to his own experiences. In March 2024 he became first minister, and was hailed as the first Black leader of a European nation. But on the eve of his election as party leader there were revelations that he had taken a huge donation (by the standards of Welsh politics) of £200,000 from a man who had been given a suspended prison sentence for dumping toxic sludge on the Gwent Levels, a wetland area with multiple SSIs. He was also accused of having lied to the Covid enquiry about deleted WhatsApp messages,

Race and nation in Wales

and he had sacked Hannah Blythyn, the minister for social partnership, for allegedly leaking text messages relating to this to the online newspaper *nation.cymru*. (Blythyn furiously denied this, and subsequently *nation.cymru* confirmed that she was not the source.) Gething then lost a vote of no confidence in the Senedd, but did not resign until a tranche of cabinet ministers had done so. He had been in the job for a mere 118 days, and has recently declared his intention to stand down at the next Senedd election. While there were some accusations of racism over the affair, nothing available in public seems to justify this claim.

The aspiration to moral nationalism remains a vital part of government policy, supported by important parts of civil society. However, it faces many challenges. Labour has been steadily losing votes in its valleys' heartlands for a long while. It had long lost the rest of Wales. If it has rejected Middle England, it may have embraced Middle Wales. Dissatisfaction with Labour has for a long time been expressed by voting for Plaid Cymru, which seemed to open up the prospect of electoral competition between two social democratic parties. However Plaid has not made substantial headway in the depressed valleys since the beginning of this century, while populist parties have gradually occupied some of that space. Current projections for the 2026 Senedd elections suggest significant wins for Reform. In that scenario, the future of the Welsh construction of race and nation will be in peril.

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Notes

1. Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales?*, London, Penguin, 1985.
2. Daniel John Evans, 'Welsh devolution as passive revolution', *Capital & Class*, Vol 42 No 3, 2018, pp489-508: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816817742343>.
3. Labour did take the extended constituency of Montgomeryshire and Glyndwr in 2024.

Soundings

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Race and nation in Wales

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